

## These are uncertain times. How can you help?

**Stay informed.** Follow EJP and IL-CHEP on Facebook for updates on EJP and statewide initiatives related to Illinois prisons

**Volunteer.** Help distribute the reentry guide or assist in research and writing the next version.  
Email: [reentry@educationjustice.net](mailto:reentry@educationjustice.net) to offer assistance.

**Donate.** Giving to EJP will help us provide distance learning in the fall and continue courses in the future.  
Give online at [educationjustice.net/home/get-involved/donate-to-ejp](http://educationjustice.net/home/get-involved/donate-to-ejp)

**Celebrate with us!** We cancelled our 11th annual EJP Impact Celebration this spring, but now more than ever it's important to come together and demonstrate hope and commitment. In that spirit, we are organizing EJP's first ever virtual gala!  
Save the date: Saturday, July 11 from 5 to 7 p.m.

Release During COVID-19:  
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



# EDUCATION JUSTICE PROJECT

An initiative of Education at Illinois



## Reentry During a Pandemic

Members of EJP's Reentry Guide Initiative quickly identified a need to publish a special, dedicated guide for people leaving prison during the pandemic.

Individuals being released right now, whether due to medical furlough, sentence commutation, parole, or deportation, will be entering a world different from the one that existed when they entered. The reentry guide group wanted to make sure they had some guidance on how to navigate this new reality, said co-coordinator Linda Larsen.

"We're finding that there's a lot of things that are really different and unique about this situation," Linda said. "We're trying to be honest and realistic about what to expect, but also give hope that they can get through this time and find support

resources out there."

Even in normal circumstances, tasks such as finding housing, getting a driver's license and ID, and applying for jobs can be challenging for people released from prison. Now, with unemployment widespread and many offices shuttered, that can be even more difficult.

*Release During COVID-19: What You Need to Know* (pictured above) provides answers on finding housing and medical care, what kinds of jobs are available, and how to navigate the deportation process. It also offers instruction on maintaining social distancing and the need to self-quarantine.

"We are trying to get [the guide] in the hands of anyone who is leaving prison and make sure we share it with

service providers, family members, other reentry organizations," Linda said.

*Release During COVID-19* is available online and in-print, in both Spanish and English. We have provided 3,000 copies to IDOC and these copies have been distributed to facilities across the state. Another 1,000 have been shipped to date to reentry organizations. Individuals can also request a reentry guide.

Please email [reentry@educationjustice.net](mailto:reentry@educationjustice.net).

You can also view it online at the EJP website.

Go to [www.educationjustice.net/home](http://www.educationjustice.net/home). The guide will be updated regularly to reflect the shifting landscape of life under the pandemic.

## Director's Letter EJP's Response to COVID-19

The Education Justice Project suspended our courses and extracurricular programs at Danville Correctional Center on March 13, 2020, just days before the Illinois Department of Corrections ordered a halt to all outside programming and went on quarantine mode due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since then, we have had to adjust to an uncomfortable new reality. Most profoundly, those of us on the outside can no longer enter the prison. This has left many of us in a continuous state of worry about the wellbeing of EJP students and of incarcerated people generally.

Where we could, we have acted. First, we innovated a system that has allowed EJP students to finish the semester and receive course credit for the classes they had been enrolled in. In addition, a brand new bi-weekly newsletter that we send into Danville lets us communicate important updates to them. We've also been able to include useful information about the Coronavirus and suggestions for taking care of

themselves, while assuring them that they are very much on our minds.

Our Reentry Guide Initiative produced a COVID-19 reentry guide in record time and has already distributed thousands of copies to prisons across Illinois. Other EJP members threw themselves into statewide efforts to get sanitizer and soap into state prisons and jails, and still others have joined decarceration campaigns, which advocate for expanded use of clemency and furlough so that as many individuals as possible are released during the pandemic.

Since April, we have held weekly Zoom meetings, open to all EJP members, to discuss the quickly changing situation and our collective and individual responses to it. These have proved essential to our wellbeing as an organization. In a time of such uncertainty, it's been vital to come together for mutual support.

In recent weeks, our conversations have included topics of policing, racism, and broader questions of social equity. These subjects relate,

of course, to the framework that informs EJP's work and to questions of personal and collective responsibility.

Throughout the past few months, we have tried to be sensitive to the fact that, as vulnerable and uncomfortable as the pandemic makes us, incarcerated individuals are living with much more danger and fear. Our hearts and concern go out to them and their families, and we continue to seek ways to support them.

In this issue, EJP members reflect on the past few months. Some consider how our roles have shifted since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in March. Others talk about the challenges and uncertainties that remain. But the hard work and dedication of EJP's members have led to some incredible triumphs as well.

Wherever you have been sheltering, I hope this newsletter finds you and yours well and healthy.

Rebecca Ginsburg  
EJP Director



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### EDUCATION JUSTICE PROJECT

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Spring Newsletter 2020



IL-CHEP Soap and Sanitizer Campaign  
 Bars of soap donated: 61,000  
 Gallons of sanitizer: 710  
 Recipients: IL Department of  
 Corrections and Cook County Jail  
 How to help: Donate online at [secure.  
 actblue.com/donate/il-chep](https://secure.actblue.com/donate/il-chep).



## In a Pandemic, Soap and Sanitizer Can Save Lives

Ellen Ritter has been an EJP member for about five years. In early March, she began a new role as EJP's Director of Student Services, about one week before we suspended programs at Danville Correctional Center.

Ellen's newly created position was intended to offer support to EJP program coordinators and oversee our academic advising program in the prison. All that was placed on hold when the prison went into

quarantine mode.

Since then, Ellen has taken a leadership role in the Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison's efforts to get soap and sanitizer into Illinois prisons. So far, the group has distributed hundreds of gallons of sanitizer and tens of thousands of bars of soap to correctional facilities around the state. The campaign is ongoing and welcomes support.

“That’s been something totally new, figuring out what I think of as a health and safety initiative,” she said. “I’m glad to do it. It’s been very rewarding.”



## A Message of Hope from Inside Danville

Through our newsletters, we have been able to hear from our students about their feelings, questions and needs during this time. One student, Michael Harrell, also provided us with a much needed message of hope for members both inside and outside. Here are some excerpts from his statement, reprinted with his permission:

“As individuals who have been incarcerated for X number of years we have adapted to our environments. We have demonstrated the ability to be resilient, to persevere. Despite the obstacles we adhere to the primary instinct of the human dynamic, self-perseverance. We have not and will not capitulate.

“EJP possesses this same perseverance, this same tenacity that disallows any soupcon of acquiescence. It’s this spirit that

permeates through all of us and despite the obstacle we shall persevere.

“So let’s add this COVID-19 pandemic to our list of unsuccessful attempts to stagnate our academic and intellectual accrument. We’re used to new normals so one more will be more than welcome. But as long as we’re capable we will persevere. It’s not all that we know, but it’s what we’re willing to show.”

## Completing the Spring 2020 Semester

Julie Spielmann is a Psychology PhD candidate who was teaching an upper-level EJP course on Intergroup Relations Theory when the coronavirus hit. Her 3-hour class periods were discussion-based – students read course materials and then spent class hours talking (and sometimes heatedly arguing) about social categorizations such as race and sexual orientation. While her students have all the course reading materials, Julia knows how challenging the material might be without those open dialogues.

“The value of the course is in the discussions and the exchange between the students, for them to hear each other’s perspectives and work through issues presented in literature,” Julia, a first-time EJP instructor, said. “That has fallen away. There’s none of that back-and-forth of communal learning.”

Since the quarantine, that back-and-forth has been re-captured, though in a more limited way. On April 15, a month after we suspended teaching at the prison, we delivered the first of our “instructional packets” to Danville prison. They include assignments, graded student work, and other communications between

students and instructors.

Some of the packets have also included newsletters that contain updates from the Urbana campus, information about COVID-19, and messages from other EJP programs such as Language Partners and Community Anti-Violence Education. The Mindfulness Discussion Group has sent in mindfulness exercises and our community librarian, Rebecca Bott, includes a book puzzle with each edition.

In the first instructional packet, Julia encouraged her students to continue on with their reading and reminded them that a future class topic was the social psychology of disease, a particularly apt subject right now.

Julia decided to keep her final project for the course, which involved students developing their own social psychology study. But because students won’t be able to look at outside research or reviews, she amended the project and made it worth a smaller piece of their overall grade. Stephen Froedge also kept a final project for the 14 students in his Greek and Roman Epic class (Classics 490). Unlike Julia, he was able to discuss the future of the

course with his students before the pandemic struck and so prepare them a little for what was to come.

Stephen’s students have all of their readings, as well as an adjusted schedule of writings and other assignments. Their final essay will not require outside research, but can rely only on the texts read over the course of the class, including Homer’s Iliad and Vergil’s Aeneid.

The hardest part for Stephen has not been the course schedule, but the lack of face-to-face interaction with his students.

“It has been difficult,” Stephen wrote in an email. “Leaving class that last day, given everything, was probably the most emotional last class I have had although it was only halfway through the semester.”

### EJP Mission Statement

The mission of the Education Justice project is to build a model college-in-prison program that demonstrates the positive impacts of higher education upon incarcerated people, their families, the neighborhoods from which they come, the host institution, and society as a whole.