

## Reentry Guides Needed More Than Ever

Since the summer, EJP's Reentry Guide Initiative has continued to grow. As of early December, we are almost completely out of copies of our Mapping Your Future Illinois reentry guide! Printed in August, the latest version features information about release during the pandemic. Over 8,000 copies so far have gone out to individuals, as well as to each prison in the IDOC system. That's more than double the number that we distributed in 2019.

The twenty-five RGI members have turned their attention to producing the 2021 editions of EJP's two reentry guides, Mapping Your Future and Returning Home, which we plan to release in February. An advisory committee of formerly incarcerated people is assisting with the revision process and will aid with distribution.

Pablo Mendoza was released from IDOC in early October and received one of the guides a few weeks later. He used it for help in getting his driver's license back, navigating life under the pandemic, and for support in reconnecting with his family.

"Every time I run across something I think, 'Let me see if that's in there.' More times than not, it has been," he says. "It's lacking in certain areas, but having this manual, it's a comfort. I can look at it and know there's some information that's going to help me as opposed to going into a situation blind."



Pablo Mendoza

Roberto Lazcano, too, found help and comfort in the guide. Released from DCC at the start of the year, he was immediately deported to Mexico, a country he hadn't lived in since he was eight years old.

"It's comforting to have somebody who has gone through it before let you know you might struggle with this but it's going to be alright," he says.

Both Roberto and Pablo are working on the RGI advisory committee to improve future versions of the guide, with updated information and help based on their own experiences.

"Having been through what I've been through I empathize with the guys still in there," Roberto says. "If there's anything I can do to provide them with the best feedback possible, the best guidance possible, that would be, I think, the least we could do."

In addition to the guides, the Reentry Guide Initiative is working with other Illinois organizations concerned with voter advocacy and legislative action to support incarcerated people. RGI has also been in discussions with the Mexican consulate in Chicago on how the Returning Home guide, which supports people facing deportation after incarceration, can be updated to assist other populations that face adjustment to life in Mexico following deportation, including dependent families.

Finally, after RGI's successful collaboration with a group in Tennessee, it hopes to continue supporting other statewide coalitions and higher education programs that want to produce reentry guides for their own students. Tennessee's guide, below, will be available in early 2021.



Upcoming reentry guide from Tennessee, produced with technical support from RGI

## Reflecting and Building

The lockdown has given us the opportunity to deepen our reflection on our practices within EJP, in several ways. Through efforts like these, EJP hopes to emerge from the pandemic more thoughtful, inclusive and collaborative.

We've created new advisory boards of formerly incarcerated people to provide us with useful feedback and ideas for our Danville-based programs.

Language Partners, our ESL program, has hosted a series of discussions about what it means to be truly participatory and collaborative.

The Mindfulness Discussion Group has produced a meditation resource guide for Black, Indigenous and People of Color, as well as creating a new mindfulness section for Mapping Your Future, EJP's Illinois reentry guide.

Our Diversity & Inclusion Team hosted a series of virtual speakers over the fall, on topics from radical self-care to defending against LGBT hatred. They have also formed a Book Club for the winter break, inviting EJP members to read Biased, by Jennifer Eberhardt or Me and White Supremacy by Layla F. Saad.

## Updates from Inside DCC

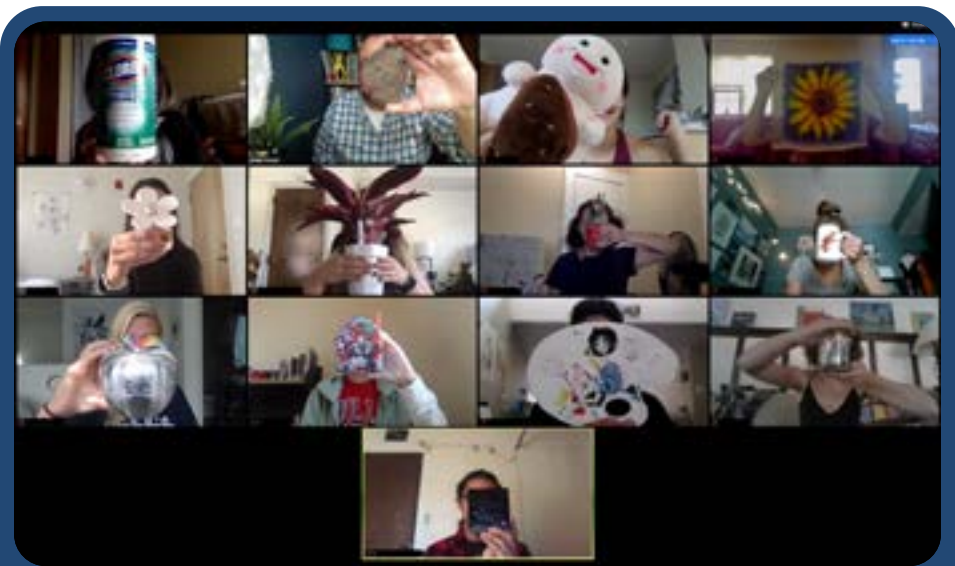
We are grieved to report that COVID is spreading rapidly inside Danville Correctional Center (DCC). After having gone most of the year without any reported cases, the number of infections among incarcerated individuals has doubled weekly since Thanksgiving. As of December 18, 182 incarcerated individuals and 95 staff have tested positive for COVID.

Renaldo Hudson, who left DCC in September, is still in touch with people inside the facility. He reports: the prison has been on lockdown since March. Staff have provided bleach, disinfectant and masks to the incarcerated population, but stress levels are running high. Incarcerated people are currently allowed out of their cells just 30 minutes per day, the only time during which they can shower and make phone calls. They are not informed about who is infected and how many people have Covid-19. Renaldo is hearing about more fights as tension and isolation increase, especially close to the holidays.

*"A 30-day lockdown is stressful enough," he says. "Everybody is scared and tired. People get scared so they get frightened and start fighting. It's a really, really tense time. The best way I can say it is just walk into your closet and close the door and know you can't come out for 15 minutes. Know you can't stretch out and breathe. Now talk about being in [that] space with another person."*

Renaldo always answers calls that come in from DCC, no matter where he is or what he's doing. Talking to someone outside the prison can be a lifeline for the men trapped in lockdown.

*"It's hard to breathe hope into a dark place called prison," he says. "The only thing that's helping people is that they feel there's people out here fighting for them and trying to get things improved for them... Do what you can. Even if it's a little greeting card, post card, just to say 'hey, there are people out here caring and watching.' Just that little word sometimes can be the anchor people need to hold on."*



*U of I Art Education students showing the projects they worked on as part of their EJP instructional videos class project.*

## EJP Innovations

The spread of coronavirus inside DCC has required innovation in our programming.

For instance, since the spring we have been unable to enter the prison. Instead, we have communicated to EJP students through newsletters that are filled with activities, jokes, and updates from EJP and the U of I campus.

Most notably, in Spring 2021, we will for the first time offer correspondence courses. (We had been scheduled to offer these this fall, but prison administration asked us to postpone them due to the fall outbreak among DCC staff.) EJP students will have the opportunity to choose between Great American Novels (ENGL 461), Immigrants and Refugees (AAS 390), and Linguistics for Language Teachers (LING 486).

## Instructional Videos

Through a \$100,000 Mellon grant, EJP is producing instructional videos that will be screened on one of DCC's institutional channels. In this way, they'll be accessible to everyone incarcerated at the facility and not just EJP students. The videos cover subjects from math and drawing to history and entrepreneurship. They feature University of Illinois instructors and others with subject matter expertise.

The videos have allowed us to find new collaborators and initiate projects we might never have otherwise. Jorge Lucero, an associate professor of art education

at UIUC, asked his class of future high school teachers to create instructional art videos for EJP.

Their series of 30-minute videos provide virtual lessons in drawing, including one that asks students to think about their memories and experiences to create a memory map.

*"The students felt like it was a real privilege to have this in the middle of the pandemic," Professor Lucero says. "This opened their eyes up to a population that could really benefit from an art education, a population that probably gets ignored. The students treated it with the sensitivity and humanity that it deserves. I'm really proud of them."*

We hope to eventually have a dedicated EJP channel at the prison for such videos. We're also delighted to be able to offer the videos to other facilities within the Illinois Department of Corrections and to other college-in-prison and jail education programs around the nation.



*Books ready for delivery to Danville Correctional Center for Spring 2021 correspondence courses*



## Reentry Guides Needed More Than Ever

EJP's Reentry Guide Initiative continues to expand in an effort to meet growing need. According to IDOC, the prison population has decreased 19% since March 2019. We've certainly seen increased demand for reentry guides.

As of early December, we are almost completely out of copies of the 2020 edition of *Mapping Your Future*, our Illinois reentry guide. The latest version features information about release during the pandemic. Over 8,000 copies so far have gone out to individuals, as well as to each prison in the IDOC system. That's more than double the number that we distributed in 2019.

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**Pablo Mendoza**

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*"It's comforting to have somebody who has gone through it before let you know you might struggle with this but it's going to be alright," he says.*

Both Roberto and Pablo are working on the RGI advisory committee and look forward to giving input to future editions of the guides, based on their own experiences.

*"Having been through what I've been through, I empathize with the guys still in there," Roberto says. "If there's anything I can do to provide them with the best feedback possible, the best guidance possible, that would be, I think, the least we could do."*

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Finally, after RGI's successful collaboration with a Tennessee-based coalition, it hopes to continue supporting other higher education programs interested in producing reentry guides.



**This new reentry guide from Tennessee, produced with technical support from EJP, will be released in early 2021.**

## Building and Deepening Our Practice

*The pandemic has created space for us to step back from our normal routines and to reflect on our practices within EJP. For this, we are grateful. We plan to emerge from the pandemic more thoughtful, inclusive, and collaborative, due to initiatives like the ones below:*

*We've created new advisory boards of formerly incarcerated people to provide feedback on our Danville-based programs.*

*Language Partners, our English as a Second Language program, has hosted a series of discussions about what it means to be truly participatory and collaborative.*

*The Mindfulness Discussion Group has produced a meditation resource guide for Black, Indigenous and People of Color, as well as creating a new mindfulness section for Mapping Your Future, EJP's Illinois reentry guide.*

*Our Diversity & Inclusion Team hosted a series of virtual speakers over the fall, on topics from radical self-care to defending against LGBT hatred. They have also formed a Book Club for the winter break, inviting EJP members to read *Biased*, by Jennifer Eberhardt or *Me and White Supremacy* by Layla F. Saad.*

### How to Support EJP

*We are humbled by the support we receive from institutional funders, including the Andrew H. Mellon Foundation and the University of Illinois. We are very grateful for their generosity.*

*However, these funds do not meet all our needs and, to no one's surprise, the University has indicated that it will reduce its support to EJP over the next three years because of the pandemic.*

*Donations from individuals like you support EJP scholarships, printing and distribution of reentry guides, and other vital program costs. We hope you can give during this season.*

*Thank you!*

## WELCOME, NEW EJP STAFF MEMBERS!

*Caitlin Brooks,  
Scholarships and Research Coordinator*



Hello everyone, my name is Caitlin Brooks and I joined EJP in September of this year. I have been digging in to learn about education justice, our programs at Danville, and the ways that I can support our mission.

My formal role is EJP Scholarships and Research Coordinator. We just finished up our annual process of reviewing scholarship applications for our five different scholarship awards. We had great applications this year, so hopefully we'll be able to celebrate our winners sometime soon! In addition to managing the scholarships program, I also organize our research group. Each month, students, faculty, and community members come together to discuss in-progress scholarly work related to Education Justice to help develop ideas and generate conversation on these important issues. We've had two meetings since I joined EJP and both have been informative and productive – I'm looking forward to a Spring full of more chances to engage with our community remotely.

*If you are an instructor interested in creating a video or two for the spring semester, please contact Mitchell Oliver at [videos@educationjustice.net](mailto:videos@educationjustice.net)*

*Jan Blair,  
VISTA Volunteer*

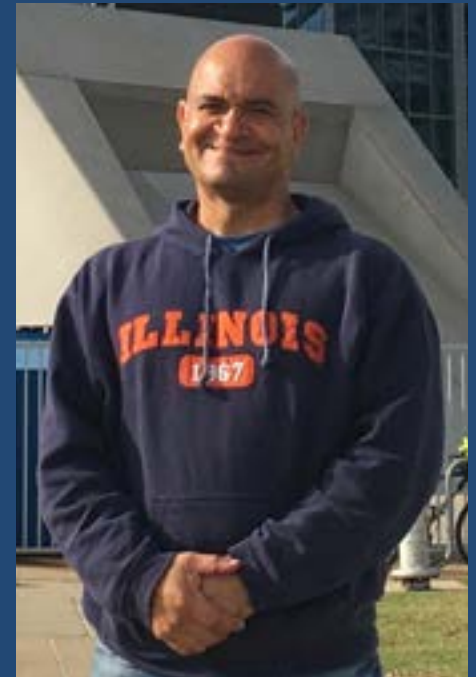


Hi, Y'all. My name is Jan Blair. I am the new VISTA Volunteer for EJP. I started this position in mid-November, as the pandemic disrupted, and continues to disrupt, all of our routines. But the silver lining in the restrictions on movement and gathering turns out to be that I am able to perform the VISTA Volunteer's duties remotely, from my home in the Appalachian mountains of Tennessee.

Currently, I am happily researching new funding sources and assisting in preparation for EJP's annual Impact Gala in April 2021. Although this year-long VISTA Volunteer position is finite in length, I hope to stay involved and continue to support the mission of the Education Justice Project, building 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.

## EJP Scholarship Program Expands to Mexico!

EJP is excited to announce the expansion of our scholarship program. Starting in 2021, EJP academic scholarships will be available to formerly incarcerated people in Mexico and their families. We will offer one scholarship to an individual formerly incarcerated in a Mexican prison and one to an individual who had been incarcerated in the US and deported (or to their immediate family members). As always, funds can be used for university programs or technical certificates from accredited institutions. Teaching English as a second language has been a popular certificate among EJP alumni in Mexico. These same alumni are helping to spread the word about the new scholarship opportunity. We're also partnering with two outstanding organizations in Mexico: *Reinserta* ([reinserta.org](http://reinserta.org)) and *Caminamos Juntos* ([cjsma.org](http://cjsma.org))



*Otilio Rosas, an EJP alumnus, was one of last year's recipients of an EJP scholarship*

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EDUCATION JUSTICE PROJECT  
an initiative of Education at Illinois

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## PELL GRANTS RESTORED

by Rebecca Ginsburg, EJP Director

Congress restored Pell Grants for incarcerated students this week.

That is incredible news.

Pell Grants were created in 1965 to provide support for low-income students. I relied on them to get through college in the 1980s.

In 1994, a major crime bill, signed into law by Bill Clinton, disallowed the use of Pell funds for incarcerated scholars and, by extension, made those funds unavailable to prison education programs. That congressional action is the reason that the number of college-in-prison programs in the US dropped in the 1990s from being in the hundreds to fewer than a dozen. The programs had relied on Pell to sustain them, and only a few were able to find alternate sources of funding.

(To be clear, Pell checks were never sent directly to incarcerated students in prison, but to the programs they were enrolled in. And those programs relied on Pell payments for teacher salaries, instructional materials, etc.)

EJP is part of a second generation of programs that grew in the aftermath of this devastating action. Programs like ours have not been able to rely on federal dollars. Instead, they created new funding models, in most cases relying on private funds from foundations and donor contributions to survive. Some programs also receive institutional funds, but this is not as common as you might think.

For instance, it was many years before EJP, which was formed in 2006, started receiving funds from the University of Illinois.

However, this era of fiscal insecurity for higher ed in prison programs might be coming to a close.

I hear frequently from faculty and graduate students at universities across the U.S. who tell me that they would like to start prison education programs, but believe the costs of doing so makes such work prohibitive. Now, they have a way forward.

Yes, the dangers of predatory reach into this space are real, now that there are dollars attached to it, but so are the opportunities for expanding access to quality education to incarcerated individuals.

**I'm happy.** This may be a game changer for EJP. As we look towards becoming a center on campus, this is likely the final piece of the funding model that we'd been working towards. It puts us on the path to sustainability.

**I'm cautious and fearful.** In the heady and congratulatory days that no doubt will follow, it's important to remember that **higher education in prison should not be a growth industry.**

This legislative action will allow more universities and colleges to do the right thing and build programs in nearby prisons. They should. I and other EJP members will be first in line to offer technical expertise and support.

There are potentially tens of thousands of individuals sitting in prison cells across the country right now who will enroll in college in the coming year because of this bill. It is likely to change many lives.

Critical prison higher education programs that are committed to ongoing reflection on the part of teachers and administrators, center incarcerated students' needs and perspectives, and insist on academic quality can be engines of progressive change.

And, yet, those of us who receive meaning and gratification from doing prison education--and, in some cases, a paycheck--need to keep the restoration of Pell in perspective.

**EJP's goal has never been a college in every prison.** We believe that prison higher education can serve prison abolition. As EJP works towards becoming a center on the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign campus, we will continue to ask how an organization committed to abolitionist values and principles can and should engage with Departments of Correction.

How can abolitionist groups work within carceral structures without naturalizing them? Can we become better at discerning the difference between reforms that strengthen the system and those that lead to liberation from it? What would a world without prisons look like? **Or a state that guaranteed access to higher education to everyone who wanted it, so that the discrepancy between the opportunities offered in prison and those on the outside became a thing of the past?**