



How Higher Education in Prison Statewide Networks are Responding to COVID-19

**Tuesday, April 14, 2020
9amPT/10amMT/11amCT/12pmET**

Overview: Join representatives of statewide networks and coalitions from across the country for a conversation about advocacy and the actions they are taking in response to COVID-19. This conversation will be an opportunity to hear more about higher education in prison advocacy and collaborations in the face of this crisis and also to share your experiences within your state or region. Representatives from all program types and networks are welcome to join the conversation and we are hopeful that many others will share lessons learned and challenges they are facing as states/groups collaborate and work to leverage their collective strength.

Panelists Include Representatives From:

California Community College Rising Scholars Network
Florida Coalition for Higher Education in Prison
Georgia Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (GACHEP)
Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (IL-CHEP)
Indiana Statewide Network
New York Consortium for Higher Education in Prison (NY-CHEP)

What are your states doing, how are you coming together, what actions are being taken, how are you functioning as a network right now?

New York

- Our approach has always been one of responding to specific events
- NYCHEP consortium - put out public statements, i.e. Second Chance Pell announcements, usually communicate via press releases
- NYCHEP is not as structured as this national network, annual meetings, try to coordinate a common voice with DOCs
- Are asking DOCs to be professional, address us as a whole group
- There are 34 orgs involved in NY, hard to get one story about how we can help, can we continue, etc.



- Suspect that NYS DOCs are under-reporting COVID-19 cases within system, lack of tests, urgent sense of a need to act, can 34 programs participate in providing PPE in prisons, we are educators but can't provide ed if no one is alive and healthy
- A lot of different players, need to contextualize that when you are organizing
- Authored group letter to commissioner, asking for centralized communication, asking for communication with students, SCP conversations about distance/correspondence learning issues/questions/confusion

Illinois:

- ILCHPEP statewide coalition formed in 2015, quarterly meetings of programs and allies, hosted first conference last fall, meet to discuss issues of common concern, often with IDOC at the table
- ILCHPEP got involved in advocacy work after books removed/banned from IDOC facilities related to race
- Formed Freedom to Learn campaign arm of ILCHPEP to specifically work with legislators, has helped them be more nimble during COVID
- Issues working on now-
 - Advocating for continued contact with students, have been able to send packets in and out, there has been consistency on this issue across the state
 - Harder issue has been advocacy around releases and furloughs -
 - Kelsey's letter adapted - reached out to governor
 - Currently has 3 committees -
 - Release Them Committee (compassionate release and medical furloughs) - this is their week of action
 - Housing Committee - reached out colleges and universities to see if they are willing to house people coming out of prison in dorms, ongoing effort to get colleges and IDOC to agree
 - Sanitizer and Soap Committee - IDOC asked for sanitizer, have been using program funds and online donation site in order to send sanitizer to one collection point and distribute to various sites, now asking for masks and soap - working on soap
 - New sanitizer concerns - don't seem to be reaching people in cells
 - Why have they been asked to provide these items (and why are they not being provided by the DOC)? will eventually ask for a hearing/review



Indiana

- First off the mark in terms of getting in touch with governor, letter signed by 100 people on March 5, received no response at all
- Response on March 20 after nudge from media, asked for collaboration, ideas to be sent to the governor's office
- Provided detailed plans asking for releases, etc. - focused on highest risk of dying, then moved to creating adequate space within facilities - asked for release of everyone who had served more than half sentence and had less than 12 months left, release everyone sentenced under old IN code - both were refused
- Last week letter came out from state government asking for jails to be emptied to extent possible
- Governor opposed all releases - "safer to be inside the prison/jail than outside"
 - When mass incarceration becomes mass murder - article by Kelsey
- Down to last effort to get specific women out - 20 women who are at highest risk of dying, but expect to fail based on governor's statement last night

Georgia

- Gradually been building coalition over last few years, focus was to support people who had left prison since each program was focused more inside - includes students, alumni, nonprofits across GA
- GCHEP started email conversations in early March about COVID about nationwide response and programming, turned into a weekly call to check in, support each other, strategize state response, coordinating so that one person could speak on everyone's behalf to DOE and DOC
- Benefit of GCHEP - allows us to work more nimbly than we can within our individual programs
- Short terms initiatives that we've started -
 - Developed direct relief fund for students and alumni who are out now, hoping to sustain this beyond COVID
 - Developing shared lists of resources around advocacy, aid, and relief around COVID, also hoping to sustain
- GCHEP formed due to proximity in same facilities, have great strong relationships
- Even within one prison, different programs are treated differently, they have made strides through GCHEP with DOE that we are all in this together as HEP programs, want to be treated the same way



- GA - not able to transition to technology instruction because state does not have bandwidth to handle even the health and safety issues, hoping to build out tech infrastructure after COVID
- Weekly meetings have been of great benefit
 - Focus on continuing instruction inside
 - Relief fund
 - Working on building infrastructure for the future

Florida

- One meeting last spring, now starting to organize around COVID
- Challenges in coalition building - still working though infrastructure, how to respond in a way that is meaningful
 - Two ideas -
 - Indiana's letter, policy demands, ideas to send to governor around decarceration
 - Providing soap and sanitizer inside with limited success, have raised 10k total but FDOC won't allow them to provide sanitizer to incarcerated people, only DOC staff
 - Have run into issues around agreements, next steps, trying to work through those to build infrastructure to make this network something more sustainable and effective
- One thing we are struggling with - advocacy vs. service without adequate infrastructure
- Struggle with own org - to be present for our students
- Tried to be more proactive, raised 10k and have 10k bars of soap, tried to get press for it to show DOC has community support, but facility was no longer able to accept donation due to not wanting press anywhere near this, had to reassure that only the coalition would be associated with the donation, media would stay out of it
- Why are we providing supplies that state should be supplying - have to do it if they won't

California

- Rising Scholars Network - 20 community colleges in CA who are serving over 6k students via face to face instruction inside facilities
- Mobilizing pre-existing networks
- In contact with CDCR leadership
 - Asking colleges for their asks of CDCR, bringing those to CDCR
 - Asking CDCR to make statewide decisions instead of deferring only to local actors



- CDCR creating memos that they can distribute to programs with guidance/info
- Open calls with teachers and colleges to connect and share resources
- Calls around supporting students on campuses who are formerly incarcerated
- Active conversation because everything is constantly changing in COVID, trying to support colleges with all these changes, helping to negotiate miscommunications
- CA community colleges are doing an incredible job, committed to getting students credits for milestones and this semester
- Statewide listserv very active lately to ask questions to whole network of 250 college/jail/prison practitioners
- All colleges wrote personalized letters on letterhead explaining commitment to students and to getting back into facilities after COVID
- Digital conference on Mon/Tues - on Tues whole morning is focused on troubleshooting issues in facilities

What is the single greatest challenge you've run into and how are you mitigating that challenge?

California

- Holding virtual town halls for Project Rebound students
- Students can't attend campuses, students were panicking with going to online platforms
- Students are gig workers, ability to earn income is cut off
- Supporting them to address cut off phones, rent issues, one of biggest issues is for folks in transitional housing without wifi - had to rally up laptops and hotspots for those students, they used to rely on the office for that, but can't use the office now with COVID

New York

- We are stepping in because no one else is doing it or cares as much about the students we serve
- Competing needs and agendas for statewide coalitions - so many different stressors and pressures at play
- How to create fair governance structure to address all these competing priorities
- Would love to have more conversations about how to organize with so many different types of programs/structures, logistical pieces of how people can come together

Indiana

- Feeling like we are too atomized, information is too dispersed nationally



- Wants to know what other states are doing, who can refute “safer inside than out” claims by state governments
- Wants to find some way not to be in our isolated states

California

- One thing we are really struggling with is performance-based grading courses - speech, English courses, where local academics can dictate requirements - i.e. speeches have to be done in person and graded, can they use recording devices - performance-based courses being dealt with very differently by each college
- Excused withdrawal being offered by some colleges, which has no effect on financial aid or ability to re-take the course

Illinois

- Endorses idea of national statement per Kelsey
- Risks of making asks of corrections - different terrain within states and across states
 - In IL, corrections is making asks of them, not other way around
 - Changes power dynamic, want to use that shift moving forward
- We ensure students are alive and well, expose conditions in prisons, do more than just educate incarcerated learners
- ILCHPEP will be stronger and bolder, poised to do a lot more good moving forward because of that - will be better connected
- Urge anyone in state coalition to think about possibility of being bolder and stronger moving forward

Indiana

- Coalition in Boston, president of Tufts considering opening up dorms to homeless etc.
- Proposal for 200 students in MA prisons be moved to dorm, have perimeter maintained by campus police, create a residential campus program

Georgia

- GCHEP has larger coalition that includes nonprofits but no DOCs
- One strategy around risks around approaching DOCs is to push those things that are higher risk over to other nonprofit partners who don't go into prisons every week



Illinois

- They targeted faith-based orgs to provide housing to those being compassionately released, they have struck out 4 times
- Expected to hear security issues from them similar to their ban the box concerns, but college president's reasoning was 1) dorms not entirely empty, students who didn't have anywhere else to go, 2) there is not a finite space with students scattered around campus/dorms, 3) archdiocese had reached out and they also turned down the city

There are a few questions in chat about access to supplies (soap, hand sanitizer, face masks) - successes of getting supplies in? Is there any advice that can be given to folks still trying to get supplies into facilities?

Florida

- Went to head of DOC in Tallahassee, got approval that each facility could decide what they wanted inside
- Got permission for soap from everyone, hand sanitizer for staff only, DOC also asked them to provide hand sanitizer to parole officers going out into the community
- Important to think about the long-term effects of this work around supplies etc.
- How much time and energy and funds are allocated when states have enormous budgets - by next week soap will be gone - what is a long-term strategy - use as leverage later?

What are the bolder strategies or steps? Next conversation about HOW states/coalitions are organized?

New York

- Similar conversation for there to be more of a PPE strategy, issue of knowing that health comes above education, if you're sick there is no homework that matters
- Issue in NY - we shouldn't be the ones focusing on health and PPE, the state ought to be ashamed that they are asking us to do this
- Mental health issues will eventually rise - if state can keep bodies safe, how can we provide continuity of human interactions, woe on all of us if HEPs are asked to protect bodies and mental health



Question (from chat): Has anyone started to engage these conversations with DOCs? Have there been opportunities to talk about lack of supplies?

Illinois:

- No one has acknowledged that failure, but they are using a more respectful communication style now, DOC asking for monetary value of donations to keep track
- Eventual advocacy conversations are not with DOCs, but with legislators

Call Chat Notes and Comments:

Let Our People Go: Week of Action (Illinois):

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/222136838855431/>

Have states encountered the DOC being unwilling to communicate with a network instead of the individual programs? Any idea why that might be occurring? Anyone have strategies on how to get our DOC partners to engage with a state consortium?

I'm curious about the anecdotes that suggest that Corrections generally seems to be more willing to communicate with individual programs than coalitions or consortia--we have been feeling reluctant to take public advocacy positions or make direct asks because we don't have the edifice of a state coalition as political cover. How have folks been gauging long-term strategy and risk with making asks of Corrections?

Kansas has formed a consortium (KCCHE) which has a Kansas DOC Education employee on our committee. The state consortium was formed by the DOC and Community Colleges with HEP programs were invited to participate. We build the relationship from the ground up.

How do Statewide networks decide their governing structure?

ILCHEP's website has some answers: <https://ilchep.org>

How are states tracking COVID-19 Cases in Prison?

Note: there was concern in the call chat around states under-reporting cases

California: <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/covid19/population-status-tracking/>



Illinois: <https://www2.illinois.gov/idoc/facilities/Pages/Covid19Response.aspx>

North Carolina:

<https://www.ncdps.gov/our-organization/adult-correction/prisons/prisons-actionsinfo-covid-19>

Georgia: <http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/content/cases>

Existing Research on the Risk of COVID-19 for Incarcerated People:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1XYG8FO7zNXZ32-P50gVhylvodFEekkBE1EejUgPsjww/edit#gid=1093551071>