

# **Report Reveals Improper Employee Fundraising, Including Use Of Prison Labor, At Illinois Prisons**

by Andrew Hensel

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The Center Square – An investigation done by the Office of the Executive Inspector General reveals improper employee benefit fundraising by the Illinois Department of Corrections, including the misuse of prison labor.

The investigation, which stemmed from an anonymous complaint in June 2017, showed that although IDOC's administrative directives limit the primary source of employee benefit fund (EBF) revenues to profits from vending machines and the employee commissaries, most of the EBFs have expanded their revenue streams by generating large sums of money from fundraising.

Jenny Vollen Katz of with the prison watchdog group The John Howard Association explained what was in the OEIG report.

"Unfortunately the report highlighted some really unfortunate behavior and a complete lack of oversight over fundraising around employee benefit funds for the Illinois Department of Corrections," Vollen Katz said.

The report also showed that the IDOC was improperly using prison labor as a means of generating money for the EBF.

State Sen. Terri Bryant, R-Murphysboro, is a former employee at Pinckneyville Correctional Center and told a story from her time at the prison and how Pinckneyville was illegally raising money by hosting a car wash.

"I wouldn't buy tickets for the car wash because I asked the warden we had then, how can you use inmates help to do car washes when the money is going to the employee benefit fund, I don't think that is legal," Bryant said. "The warden we had at that time did not agree with me, so I am glad they looked at that."

The EBF profits are supposed to come from vending machines and the employee commissaries but the report shows that from 2012 through 2017, more than 70% of those profits came from "other" sources.

Of the 29 EBFs, 10 facilities in Illinois raised over 90% of their profits from other sources:

- Big Muddy 99%
- Centralia 93%
- Fox Valley 17 100%
- Jacksonville 95%
- Kewanee 18 95%
- Pinckneyville 99%
- Sheridan 92%
- Southwestern 95%
- Springfield 97%

- Vandalia 96%

The use of inmate labor at Pinckneyville Correctional for the car wash would qualify as a profit listed as "other."

Vollen Katz criticized the use of inmate labor for employee gain.

"The use of prison labor in order to generate fundraising streams is truly disturbing," Vollen Katz said.

The report also showed how correctional facilities across the state were illegally accepting donations from state vendors.

In 2017 at Pinckneyville Correctional, funds were being raised by the use of a 5k walk or run.

Although they were not legally allowed to accept donations from state vendors, the documents show that 22 businesses and governmental entities sponsored the Pinckneyville EBF's 2017 5K race.

The OEIG sent out a news release regarding the findings of the report.

"These expansive fundraising efforts led to various problematic practices, such as soliciting donations from local businesses without ensuring that they were not State vendors, improperly holding raffles, selling merchandise in a way that evaded statutory and IDOC limitations, and devoting large amounts of State time to EBF activities," the agency said. "In addition, the investigation discovered that the EBFs spent much of the funds they raised on employee entertainment; in some cases, they spent their funds in ways that benefited only a select few employees."

In response to the report, and at the direction of the prior and current governors' administrations, IDOC undertook an extensive review and overhaul of EBF procedures. A senior IDOC employee was also suspended for 15 days.