



Illinois Civil Commitment Archive

Emilie Hoy's Capstone sponsored by Free to Heal



Introductions



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Free to Heal

<https://archive.insidecivcomil.com/>

Free to Heal is a collective working to end Civil Commitment as an institution in Illinois.

Civil Commitment is an unjust continuation of the carceral system that undercuts the legal process and citizen's rights to keep people locked up after they have served their sentence.

Context

Dozens of people are locked up based on arbitrary judgements with no resolution to their time in sight. The conditions inside are more restrictive than most prisons and staff are actively antagonistic to the citizens trapped inside. The Illinois Civil Commitment Archive's goal is to spread information about this institution by promoting and highlighting the words and experiences of incarcerated people directly impacted. The archive contains 90 digital scans of communications with people inside the civil commitment center, including handwritten letters, newspaper articles, and administrative forms.

The Project

In order to make the communications and experiences of inmates available to a broader audience, I transcribed the digital files in the archive. Originally, this was a tool to become familiar with the materials in the archive and was not intended to be the entirety of the project, but became the whole work due to factors discussed later.

Completed	Item #	Page Length	Winter Quarter Week	Item # Range	Completed
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	222	4		01-14 226-231	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	223	0		01-21 232-234	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	224	2		01-28 235-241	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	225	2		02-04 242-246	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	226	3		02-11 247-251	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	227	4		02-18 252-254	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	228	11		02-25 255-261	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	229	17		03-03 262-268	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	230	6	3/10/2024 - 04/06/2024	269-280	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	231	3		04-07 281-300	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	232	27			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	233	4			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	234	1	Spring Quarter Week		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	235	8		04-14 301-304	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	236	10		04-21 305-311	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	237	3			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	238	8			

I measured how many pages each document had and crafted a schedule that would be a roughly equivalent number of hours each week to transcribe. My laptop failed during Spring Break, but I was able to modify my initial schedule and manage my time to get back on track.

What Happened

Given the size of the corpus and limits of technology, I wanted to automate as much of the process as I could. I backed up my transcriptions where other Free to Heal resources are stored and looked into optical character recognition (OCR) software. Free and open source options were my ideal, and I settled on R. Richardson's FreeOCR, version 5.41 published in 2015, that is built on Google's Tesseract. This software, while not open source, is built on open source technologies and allows a broad range of uses, including for personal and commercial use.

This software does have limitations. While it was adequate for many of the article scans, a majority of the files produced incomprehensible text due to the quality of the scan or the color contrast and had to be transcribed entirely by hand or significantly modified from the software output to accurately reflect what people had written and how they had written it. Over the course of 16 weeks, I transcribed by hand or heavily edited the OCR'd text of 90 files, totalling 600 pages of text.

Key Insights

- People just want to be free
 - They want to see their families and loved ones
 - They want to leave the facility alive rather than in a body bag
- People are still finding love and joy inside the facility and resisting as much as they can

My Thoughts

While my technical skills were not pushed during this project, it spurred a lot of reflecting around activism and information that I am still grappling with. People who have committed child sexual assault or other sex crimes are a population who many groups that strive for prison abolition overlook or deliberately avoid. It is a lot easier to say that we should abolish the prison-industrial complex and create communities of care or work toward rehabilitation instead of punishment when the crimes discussed are entrenched in socio-cultural factors like poverty and redlining rather than people actively choosing to commit sex crimes against children or women. Regardless of your personal thoughts on that, the current system is not working. Although touting itself as a way to rehabilitate, the facility instead acts as a holding cell where people rarely leave and those who do are often returned for unrelated minor offenses. Reading the letters over the last few months has shown me that these are people. They have differences and personalities and struggles with gender and identity even as some are unrepentant or misogynistic. Some are trying to go to school, others keep bringing lawsuits to court to make conditions inside better and still others keep running lists of everyone who has died inside so that their names will be remembered.

Next Steps

I was not the first UW iSchool capstone student to work on this archive, nor will I hopefully be the last. There are many other projects and directions for future students to take with the archive and sponsoring organization that I was not as interested in or did not get to during my project.

One future aspect of a capstone project could be to create a digital exhibition of the files. Currently, the archive is largely these files with some explanatory information on the goals of the organization, but a dedicated exhibition of some of the materials with a narrative would be a great tool to promote the archive and start to tell a story with the materials.