Federal Judge Orders Florida to Treat Hepatitis C Among Prisoners

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Last week, a federal judge ordered the Florida Department of Corrections to begin treating all prison inmates who test positive for hepatitis C virus (HCV) with next-generation medications, The Associated Press reports.

In response to a class-action lawsuit filed last spring by three HCV-positive inmates who were denied treatment by both the state and its private medical care provider, U.S. District Court Judge Mark Walker concluded that Florida's prison system had failed to provide adequate treatment to inmates due to lack of funding.

Walker told the state to submit a new plan by December 1, 2017, including timetables that would show how the state plans to comply with his order. He drove home the order by writing in his decision: "This court will not tolerate further foot dragging."

As a result, Florida will now have to figure out a way to treat the estimated 7,000 to 20,000 inmates living with hepatitis C who may be eligible to receive medication statewide. The Florida Department of Corrections estimates that treating all those inmates with direct-acting antivirals at a price of around $37,000 per patient for a standard 12-week course of treatment could cost the state between $200 million and $700 million over the next few years.

Spokespeople from Florida's DOC say the state has not yet decided whether to appeal the judge's decision but that Florida is committed to ensuring the health of all inmates and will soon determine a plan of action.

Meanwhile, only 13 HCV-positive inmates of the more than 7,000 Florida prisoners who are currently eligible for care have received antiviral treatment so far.

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