Lawsuit Accuses Missouri Prisons of Denying Hepatitis C Treatment to Thousands

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A class-action lawsuit has been filed in Missouri on behalf of thousands of inmates against the Missouri Department of Corrections alleging that the state's prison system and its health care provider are purposely denying medical treatment to prisoners with hepatitis C virus (HCV). The case claims that such a policy violates the Constitution's Eighth and Fourteenth amendments as well as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), KCUR reports.

The three named plaintiffs in the suit are incarcerated in different Missouri prisons and are represented by the American Civil Liberties Union of Missouri as well as the Roderick and Solange MacArthur Justice Center in St. Louis. The lawsuit claims that at least 10 to 15 percent of the state's prisoners are currently infected with the viral liver disease, however, the exact number is unknown due to lack of routine testing in the state's system. So far, very few have received hepatitis C treatment.

In addition to the Missouri Department of Corrections, the prison lawsuit names Corizon, LLC, a Tennessee-based contractor that provides medical treatment for state prison systems across the country. George Lombardi, former director of the Missouri Department of Corrections, is named personally in the case along with 21 other individual defendants, including doctors and others responsible for prison medical care.

The Missouri lawsuit was filed the same day that Lombardi sent a resignation letter to prison employees following the publication of a report by The Pitch magazine that Missouri paid more than $7.5 million to prison employees between 2012 and 2016 to settle allegations of harassment on the job.

"Prison officials are torturing hundreds of inmates—sometimes to death—by withholding a cure to an often fatal disease," said Tony Rothert, legal director at the ACLU of Missouri in a recent statement about the case.

Legal advocates also argue that in addition to violating human rights, systematic denial of hepatitis C treatment to prisoners may also sharply increase the cost of medical care prison systems must pay when their condition worsens and may also exacerbate the spread of the blood-

borne illness inside and outside the prison.

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