Nevada to Launch Hepatitis C Test-and-Treat Program

Incarcerated individuals have a very high rate of hep C infection, making their time in custody an ideal opportunity for treatment.

December 24, 2019 By Benjamin Ryan

In a major move to address the hepatitis C virus (HCV) epidemic, Nevada's prison system will launch an initiative to test all inmates for the virus and provide direct-acting antiviral (DAA) treatment to those who need it, according to U.S. News & World Report.

Highly tolerable and effective DAA treatments began to hit the market in late 2013 and came with a huge price tag—around $100,000—during the first few years they were available. Such exorbitant costs have made state prison systems—with their typically cash-strapped health-care budget—highly reluctant to provide treatment to inmates.

Such reluctance comes at a high cost to society given the fact that incarcerated individuals have a very high infection rate. After release, such individuals will likely cost state Medicaid budgets even more in health care expenses should the virus be allowed to continue to damage their livers over time.

Additionally, inmates have high rates of injection drug use, which poses the risk that they will transmit the virus to others, whether in prison (where tattooing is also a major risk factor) or out in the community.

By law, prisons must provide inmates with medical care.

Over the last few years, as the DAA market has been saturated with offerings from multiple pharmaceutical companies, prices have fallen considerably. Now, according to the Las Vegas Review-Journal, inmates can receive HCV treatment for as little as $5,000.

Nevada's Department of Corrections has budgeted $6.8 million for the test-and-treat program for its approximately 13,000 inmates.

State lawmakers were frustrated to learn that the corrections department had not asked the legislature for approval of such funding. Rather, the department intends to seek permission to transfer contingency funds, which will likely exacerbate its existing budget deficit.

The hep C program will include counseling to teach inmates how to reduce their risk of contracting or transmitting the virus.

To read the U.S. News & World Report article, click here.

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