Ohio Advocates Say Hepatitis C Criminalization Is Driving Stigma

Earlier this month, an Ohio man living with hepatitis C was sentenced to 18 months in prison for spitting at police officers and medics.

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Earlier this month, an Ohio man living with hepatitis C virus (HCV) was sentenced to 18 months in prison for spitting at police officers and medics. Arguing that criminalization drives stigma and is not effective at stopping the spread of the virus, advocates have decried the case, NPR reports.

In January, Matthew Wenzler, 27, was reportedly found lying on a Cleveland street. When police and emergency responders tried to put him on a stretcher to take him to the hospital, Wenzler allegedly repeatedly spit saliva mixed with blood at them, striking one officer in the eye.

Wentzler was arrested and charged with assault. In Ohio, as in several other states, it's a felony for people who know they have HIV, hepatitis or tuberculosis to expose another person to their blood, saliva, semen, urine or other bodily substances with malicious intent.

Advocates for people living with HIV have been fighting against such laws for nearly 30 years, arguing that they drive stigma and citing several studies that suggest they do not effectively curb the spread of the virus. In recent years, a dozen states have added hepatitis C to the list of criminalized medical conditions.

To learn more about hepatitis C criminalization and its negative impact on advocacy, treatment and education initiatives, click here.

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