



South Dakota to Improve Hepatitis C Treatment in Prison

A new policy will test for hepatitis C and administer treatment regardless of stage of infection.

January 23, 2023 By Laura Schmidt

The head of South Dakota prisons is revamping how the system treats [incarcerated](#) people with [hepatitis C](#).

Although the new hepatitis C policy is not yet finalized, Corrections Secretary Kellie Wasko [told STAT](#) that the goal is to treat all incarcerated people with hepatitis C, regardless of the stage of infection. The policy will also require people being booked into [prison](#) to be tested for hepatitis C.

“Everybody will be treated,” Wasko said. “That is the goal.”

A recent [STAT investigation](#) revealed that South Dakota was the worst state in the country in terms of hepatitis C care in prison. Due to a policy that required people to be seriously ill before receiving [treatment](#), just seven people were tested for the virus last year, according to STAT.

Wasko credited the swift policy change to the STAT investigation saying it “actually helped me to move my agenda along—to say, ‘See, this is what I’ve been talking about for two months.’”

“We needed that,” she added.

A trained nurse and correctional health care specialist, Wasko, who was hired in early 2022, said the state’s former policies and treatment rates were “not acceptable” and “not consistent with [the] community standard of care.”

Starting last fall, the prison’s health care, which was previously managed by the state’s health department, is now the responsibility of the Department of Corrections. Wasko has been working to improve the state’s protocols since.

“We will be doing better,” she said, adding that the previous officials in charge of treating hepatitis C “had done the best with what they thought was good care.”

Wasko said medical personnel have started training on the new policy and could begin prescribing direct-acting antivirals to individuals with hep C soon. Priority groups will receive treatment within

90 days, according to Wasko.

By 2024, Wasko intends to test and treat everyone entering South Dakota prisons within two to three weeks. This is a very ambitious goal considering there are currently about 400 incarcerated people with hepatitis C, and Wasko expects this number to increase as the state tests more frequently. Paying for the treatment is another challenge.

Wasko said she'll worry about whether more funding is needed at a later date.

"Right now, I've just told [medical staff] to responsibly start treating patients, and we will assess in about 90 days," Wasko said.

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