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North Carolina Prison Lawsuit Demands Universal Screening, Treatment for Hepatitis C

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November 7, 2018 By Casey Halter

A lawsuit filed on behalf of three inmates in North Carolina is seeking to get all inmates in the state's prison system tested for hepatitis C virus (HCV). Specifically, the plaintiffs hope to change how the state manages the liver virus in its correctional system as well as expand access to treatment, WRAL reports.

Lawyers for the inmates asked a federal judge last week to order the North Carolina prison system to implement a universal testing and treatment protocol more consistent with the medical norms of the private sector. In addition to getting all inmates screened upon entry, they are asking that prisoners be treated under new rules that recommend treatment for patients upon diagnosis. (Currently, inmates must wait until they have a certain degree of liver scarring to access medication.) Attorneys are also hoping to turn their lawsuit against the Department of Public Safety into a class-action case, in which they would potentially represent thousands of incarcerated people across the state.

Currently, North Carolina's prison system has mandatory HIV testing for all inmates but tests patients for GCV only if they ask. However, advocates argue that testing for hepatitis C, which is also spread through blood or sexual contact, should be mandatory as well. The price for hepatitis C treatment in prisons has decreased significantly over the past few years, falling from nearly $90,000 per patient for a standard 12-week course of medications to what advocates argue is a more affordable $25,000.

In response, attorneys for the state defended the prison system's current protocol, saying that the plaintiffs want a "utopian gold standard" for hepatitis C care that the prison is not required to uphold.

Meanwhile, studies have found that anywhere between 16 and 41 percent of prison populations across the United States are living with the virus. Thus far, no state prison systems have adopted the protocols that North Carolina advocates are demanding.

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