

Women at Wisconsin's Taycheedah Prison Suffer Medical Neglect and Receive Worse Mental Health Care Than Men

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MILWAUKEE -- In the first class action lawsuit on behalf of women prisoners in Wisconsin, the American Civil Liberties Union is charging that the state prison system puts the lives of women prisoners at risk through grossly deficient health care and provides far inferior mental health treatment as compared to men.

The lawsuit, filed by four women prisoners at Taycheedah Correctional Institution, the ACLU's National Prison Project and the ACLU of Wisconsin, asks the court to order reforms to the system so that constitutionally adequate care is made available.

"When the government puts someone behind bars, it has an obligation to provide humane treatment," said Gouri Bhat, a lawyer with the National Prison Project. "The women at Taycheedah are in prison to pay their debt to society, not to be subjected to untreated disease and premature death. But that is exactly what they are enduring at Taycheedah."

In a legal complaint filed on Monday, the ACLU charged that the prison's health system violates the Constitution's Eighth Amendment prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment, as well as the Fourteenth Amendment guarantee of equal protection, because the women receive mental health care far inferior to what male prisoners receive. The ACLU said these lapses in mental health care occur against the backdrop of a prison system that has a suicide rate of twice the national average.

According to the complaint, the system dramatically fails women with both physical and mental diseases, as two well-publicized incidents demonstrate. In February 2000, a 29-year-old asthmatic prisoner collapsed and died in Taycheedah's cafeteria after repeated requests for medical help. In June 2005, an 18-year-old suicidal prisoner hanged herself in her cell while supposedly "in observation" in the mental health unit at Taycheedah, which provides no in-patient care and serves only to isolate and punish the most vulnerable women. Unlike the women at Taycheedah, men with severe mental health issues may be assigned to the Wisconsin Resource Center, an inpatient psychiatric facility that provides round-the-clock care and individualized treatment for male offenders.

Even beyond these high-profile cases, the medical system is failing women at Taycheedah on a daily basis, said the ACLU. The lawsuit graphically describes the human suffering resulting from the breakdown of an understaffed, underfunded and

dangerously dysfunctional health care system in Wisconsin's prisons. One of the plaintiffs, Debbie Ann Ramos, was not seen by a gynecologist for seven years after arriving at Taycheedah, despite a diagnosis of chronic endometriosis and progressively worsening vaginal bleeding. Ramos ultimately needed a hysterectomy that might have been avoided by timely care.

Another prisoner, Tammy Young, developed painful, bleeding sores on her scalp in November 2003. Despite her repeated requests for treatment for more than 18 months, the medical staff at Taycheedah failed to test Young for MRSA, a highly contagious form of staph infection that plagues prisons and other institutions. Today, scores of women at Taycheedah are infected with MRSA.

The prison's mental health system – which seems to consist of little more than solitary confinement and the over-prescription of psychotropic drugs – may be responsible for even greater harm. One of the plaintiffs, Kristine Flynn, has received no group or individual therapy in five years at Taycheedah even though she has been diagnosed as bipolar and seriously mentally ill. Flynn attempted suicide six days after her eight medications were abruptly discontinued by prison staff. Vernessia Parker, another plaintiff who has been suicidal, was found by a court to be in need of in-patient mental health treatment but has never left Taycheedah, where she rarely sees mental health care staff and her calls to crisis intervention staff go unanswered for weeks

“These situations are not isolated mistakes,” said Larry Dupuis, the ACLU of Wisconsin's legal director. “They are manifestations of a system that has been in crisis for years, and the state has made no meaningful effort to address its underlying problems.”

A 2002 study by the National Institute of Corrections found grossly inadequate staffing, confused lines of supervision and almost no mechanism for preventing medical errors throughout the Wisconsin prison system. Compounding the problem, medicines are distributed by untrained prison guards instead of medical staff. Other internal studies have confirmed the seriousness of these problems.

“It is time for Wisconsin to live up to its constitutional obligations to provide decent health care to women in its custody,” said Chris Ahmuty, the ACLU of Wisconsin's executive director. “Since the legislature and the administration can't muster the political will to do so voluntarily, we are asking the courts to order these reforms, before more women suffer and die unnecessarily.”

The lawsuit was filed against senior officials in the state corrections department as well as Governor Jim Doyle. The four named women in the lawsuit are Ramos, Flynn, Parker and Lenda Flournoy. A copy of the complaint is online at: <http://www.aclu-wi.org>.

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