

Lawsuits allege Alabama prison inmates left to die of treatable diseases

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Nineteen-year-old Deundrez Woods died in an Alabama jail last year of a gangrenous infection after being denied food, water, and medical treatment for days in a medical observation cell, according to a lawsuit filed in Alabama federal court last week.

The lawsuit is the third of its kind filed against Madison County jailers this year. The civil rights attorney representing the plaintiffs in all three cases alleges that the inmates were deliberately denied treatment for common and treatable ailments and left to die in order to cut costs, counting on the health care contractor's liability insurance to cover the costs of any lawsuits.

Woods was arrested and sent to prison on July 19, 2013 after allegedly stealing *Star Wars* DVDs and attempting to pass off a counterfeit \$100 bill in two separate incidents. His bail was set at the absurdly high sum of \$28,000. While in jail awaiting trial, a wound in his foot became infected.

Woods was never given treatment, despite having hallucinations and being unable to communicate as the disease progressed. On August 6, he was put in a medical observation cell, where he was promptly forgotten. Prison records do not even demonstrate that Woods received food after August 14, or had access to water after August 12.

Finally, as the stench from his gangrenous foot became impossible to ignore, prison guards hosed him down and placed him in a different cell. Five days later Woods lay dead, naked on the floor of his cell. Woods never received any care or even inspection of his injury, despite the fact that, according to the complaint filed that week, "The gangrenous wound on top of his right foot was clearly visible had anyone bothered to look."

The victims in the other two lawsuits, also arrested for misdemeanors, died of similarly treatable diseases.

30-year-old Tanisha Jefferson died in October 2013 of constipation while incarcerated in Madison County, despite having repeatedly sought treatment and filing a medical grievance when she was denied treatment. According to her lawyer, when she finally saw a doctor on October 29, he omitted all reported symptoms in his notes that would have triggered further testing. She finally collapsed and died two days later. Sixty-one-year-old Nikki Listau died after falling out of her bunk due to alcohol withdrawal-related seizures. Despite suffering a broken femur, she was never taken to a hospital.

Far from being isolated cases, the Madison County deaths are an expression of the routine disregard for prisoners' health throughout the state. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), there are only 15.2 doctors (factoring in part-time physicians) for the entire state-level prison system, with an average caseload of 1648 patients. Only seven out of 2280 Alabama state prisoners diagnosed with Hepatitis C were receiving treatment as of April 2014. The SPLC has also discovered multiple cases in which sick inmates, without their consent, were placed under "do not resuscitate" orders by prison administrators.

The conditions in Alabama jails, in turn, are partly the result of a nationwide privatization drive of prison health care systems, as state governments seek ways to slash the cost of housing record numbers of prisoners. Around 20 states have privatized at least portions of their prison health care systems.

Contracts are awarded primarily on the basis of the lowest bidder: In Alabama for example, price accounts for 1350 points on the 3000-point scale used to assess contract bids, compared to a mere 100 points for qualifications and experience. The prison health care industry is a multi-billion-dollar and fast growing

industry, highly concentrated in a relative handful of nationwide firms.

The private contractor in all three Madison County deaths, Peoria, Illinois-based Advance Correctional Healthcare, has contracts in more than 230 county jails (but only 650 employees) in 17 states. Since its founding in 2002, the company has been listed as one of the 5000 fastest growing private companies in the country three times by *Inc.* magazine.

The lawsuits filed last week follow a report this September on the health care crisis precipitated by the privatization of prison health care in Florida in 2013. Within months after the takeover of the system by Corizon, Inc, the country's largest prison health care company, inmate death statistics shot up to a ten year high, while the number of seriously ill inmates sent to the hospital fell by almost half. Corizon, Inc. is also the contractor for state-level prisons in Alabama.



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