

# Pennsylvania Department of Corrections blocks thousands of inmates from receiving life-saving hepatitis-C drug

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The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) is purposely withholding from inmates a life-saving drug for hepatitis-C (Hep-C) and will only provide the drug to inmates once the disease has progressed to advanced stages. An estimated 6,000 to 10,000 inmates are currently battling the disease inside Pennsylvania state prisons.

Two complaints have been filed against the Pennsylvania DOC, including a class action suit filed last summer. It states that the DOC, “by policy and practice, systematically denies necessary medical care for inmates diagnosed with Hepatitis C Viral infections, thereby placing them at substantial and unnecessary risk for severe illness, injury and death.”

This violates the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, the plaintiffs, Salvatore Chimenti, Daniel Leyva, and David Maldonado, claim.

During the court case in Scranton, the state DOC reluctantly released their new Hep-C treatment protocol. Under the protocol, prison officials will only provide treatment when the inmate is in a veritable coffin.

The state will only consider treatment when advanced cirrhosis is visible along with an esophageal varices, that is, after prisoners have already suffered irreversible liver damage that could result in death, combined with the swelling of the blood vessels in the esophagus to the verge of bursting. Symptoms range from black, tarry stools, vomiting blood, and shock. If not visible, the inmate has to wait three years before another test for this condition is administered.

Hep-C is a potentially life-threatening disease that primarily assaults the liver. The Mayo Clinic describes it as “an infection caused by a virus that attacks the

liver and leads to inflammation. Most people infected with the hepatitis C virus (HCV) have no symptoms. In fact, most people don’t know they have the hepatitis C infection until liver damage shows up, decades later, during routine medical tests. Hepatitis C is one of several hepatitis viruses and is generally considered to be among the most serious of these viruses. Hepatitis C is passed through contact with contaminated blood—most commonly through needles shared during illegal drug use.”

Because of the strict standards of testing, out of the 6,000-10,000 inmates affected with Hep-C, only 4 or 5 inmates were being treated for the disease, according to a state witness.

Nationwide, Hep-C affects between 2.3 million and 5.2 million people in the United States.

The state has said the cost of treatment would be about \$85,000 per inmate, a reason for it to bar treatment, but inmates with advanced complications from Hep-C will incur more costs for the state, when factoring in hospitalizations, tests, and other treatments.

Banning inmates this life-saving Hep-C medicine is apparently happening in other states as well. Civil action lawsuits have been filed in Minnesota and Massachusetts. New Mexico is currently debating how much money to allocate for the more-than-3,000 inmates afflicted with Hep-C.

Renowned journalist and inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal has also filed claims that the state is violating his First, Fifth, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendment rights. A journalist who has spoken out against police brutality and racism, Mumia has been a political prisoner since 1982, serving part of his sentence on death row, for a frame-up in which the state has accused him of the

murder of a Philadelphia police officer. The trial garnered international attention for its politically motivated bias.

Mumia's legal actions have corroborated the complaints filed by Pennsylvania inmates over inmate treatment. After Mumia tested positive for Hep-C in 2012, prison officials refused to properly test how far advanced it is and to provide any kind of treatment for him. In the spring of 2015, he had life-threatening blood sugar levels and kidney failure, sending him to the emergency room in an unconscious state. Still, the state declined to provide any treatment, afflicting him with bloody sores and a full body rash, swelling, and a fever, all of which are complications from Hep-C.



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