

3 women dead in 25 days: Social murder in Michigan prisons

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The Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility in Ypsilanti (WHV), Michigan’s only prison for women convicted of felonies, holds nearly 1,800 people. In just 25 days, three women incarcerated there have died: Khaira Howard, 28, on May 13; Rebecca Fackler, 57, on May 17; and Ashley Hoath, 36, on June 6. Their deaths follow that of Jennifer Wallace, 54, in November 2025.

In the days before she died, Howard contacted her family in extreme distress. Her father, Don Howard, said prison staff had forced his daughter to clean the facility’s heavily contaminated ventilation systems without protective equipment. “Mold was coming down as she was putting the water up,” he recounted. Despite showing clear signs of a severe medical crisis, Howard was denied care by the facility’s private healthcare contractors, according to her family and attorneys. Her attorneys also stated that she had been eligible for parole since March 5 but that the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) failed to enroll her in the programming required as a condition of release. Howard died two weeks before her scheduled parole date of May 27.

Four days later, Rebecca Fackler, a diabetic recovering from recent surgery, was in medical crisis when she sought care. Corrections staff allegedly refused to allow her into the healthcare unit. She died shortly afterward. A former inmate and friend of Fackler said she was “heartbroken, but not surprised,” pointing to chronic delays in medical intervention at the prison and dangerous environmental conditions. “The entire corner of the ceiling had actually started to fall in, and it was covered in black mold, so they just shut down that one shower,” she said.

Ashley Hoath began complaining of severe stomach illness in the early morning hours of June 6. According to the MDOC, a corrections officer noticed that Hoath was unwell and vomiting, prompting an escort to the prison’s healthcare unit. Medical staff determined that she required an ambulance, and she was transferred to Trinity Health Ann Arbor Hospital, where her condition rapidly deteriorated. She died hours later on Saturday morning. Her death remains under investigation pending autopsy and toxicology reports.

The May-June deaths follow that of Jennifer Wallace, who died of sepsis in November 2025. A severe equipment shortage at the facility, which had just 56 wheelchairs for 126 incarcerated people with wheelchair prescriptions, deprived Wallace of mobility and caused her to miss medications and meals. By the end, she was confined to a wheelchair, unable to hold her head up, and her skin

was described as gray. According to her family, the MDOC changed Wallace’s medication during her incarceration, worsening an infection in her mechanical heart valve.

The current crisis is the culmination of more than a decade of systemic degradation. After budget cuts and facility consolidations in 2009 made WHV the sole destination for women convicted of felonies in Michigan, the prison population surged past 2,200. Administrators converted storage areas, closets and common rooms into makeshift housing, overwhelming the facility’s ventilation and sanitation systems.

In 2014, the ACLU documented what it called “barbaric and unconstitutional” conditions at WHV, including the denial of food and water to mentally ill prisoners, the use of hog ties and Tasers, and prisoners left naked in their own waste for extended periods. At least one mentally ill prisoner was transferred to a hospital after being found unresponsive in her cell and was later pronounced brain dead. Three prisoners filed grievances after being housed together in an 8’x12’ cell converted from a chemical storage closet, reporting no ventilation, no privacy and inadequate sanitation. In 2018 and 2019, a scabies outbreak went undiagnosed for months by the prison’s private medical contractor.

A class action lawsuit filed in 2009 on behalf of more than 900 women who reported sexual abuse by guards forced the implementation of a female-only staffing policy. For years, WHV subjected prisoners to mandatory body cavity searches following family visits, attorney meetings and routine work shifts. Women were forced to strip naked and submit to invasive genital inspections by guards in view of other prisoners. More than 60 prisoners reported refusing visits from their own families to avoid the subsequent violation. In 2025, the ACLU filed a new lawsuit after the MDOC began recording strip searches on body cameras. Guards allegedly conducted the searches “in the most invasive manner possible,” permanently capturing the forced exposure on state servers.

Most lethally, the crumbling infrastructure has produced an epidemic of black mold. In a June 2025 order summarizing the allegations in a federal lawsuit over conditions at WHV, U.S. District Judge Stephen J. Murphy III described the environment:

Huron Valley is infested with mold. ... The mold eats through bricks and door frames. It drips off the ceiling. It falls out of air vents. It bubbles and bursts through paint.

At the same time, inmates, lacking even paper towels or mops, have resorted to scrubbing cells with menstrual pads. ... One guard went so far as to order inmates to scratch the mold off shower tiles with their fingernails.

The mold exposure has affected both prisoners and staff. According to Bridge Michigan, Laresha Thornton, a former teacher's aide at WHV, testified before state lawmakers that she had been diagnosed with a chronic inflammatory disease linked to conditions at the facility. "I didn't realize that the mold had affected me," Thornton said. "I was hospitalized and told that my intestines were swollen because of the mold."

Krystal Clark, incarcerated since 2011, had suffered profound physical disfigurement. Mold exposure had ravaged her ears and caused the left side of her face to droop.

In an interview with WDIV/ClickOnDetroit, Clark described relentless pain and physical deterioration. "I'm sitting here just suffering, suffering. In pain every day. Headaches every day. Body breaking out all over my body," she said. "The mold in the facility is affecting me every day."

The MDOC's response to overwhelming physical evidence has been denial. Spokespeople continue to assert that "claims suggesting that the facility has dangerous, systemic, black, or toxic mold conditions are simply false." This denial is economically driven: Acknowledging systemic mold infestation would legally oblige the state to authorize tens of millions of dollars in capital expenditures.

The structural driver of these deaths is the subordination of prisoner healthcare to the profit motive. Medical care across the entire Michigan prison system is managed by VitalCore Health Strategies under a nearly \$589 million contract running through September 30, 2026. VitalCore operates on a capitated model, meaning the state pays the company a fixed rate per prisoner regardless of actual medical need. This creates a structural incentive to deny care, delay procedures, refuse specialist referrals, understaff clinics and substitute critical medications with cheaper alternatives.

VitalCore is under scrutiny in Mississippi, where a \$357 million contract has been associated with mass denial of care, including thousands of prisoners denied Hepatitis C medication, and one prisoner who required an amputation after a broken arm was allegedly ignored. In Vermont, VitalCore faces a wrongful death lawsuit over a prisoner who died of bacterial endocarditis due to alleged medical indifference. Despite this record, the administration of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer is requesting an additional \$4.2 million in the Fiscal Year 2026-27 budget to fund a 3 percent inflationary increase for VitalCore's contract rates.

The catastrophic conditions at WHV are the product of deliberate policy decisions made at the highest levels of Michigan's Democratic Party-controlled state government.

MDOC Director Heidi Washington is a key figure. Appointed in 2015 by Republican Governor Rick Snyder, she was reappointed in 2019 by Democratic Governor Whitmer. Following the recent deaths, 30 lawmakers signed a letter demanding Washington's

resignation. This demand, however justified, promotes the illusion that the Democratic establishment can be pressured into reforming a system it has designed and defended for years. Whitmer has refused to fire or even publicly reprimand Washington, instead calling for a "swift, thorough, and transparent investigation."

The prison is less than a mile from Toyota Motor North America's Research and Development Headquarters, where transnational capital pours billions into artificial intelligence and autonomous vehicle development. The most advanced intellectual labor of the working class is harnessed to generate profits for the global financial oligarchy, while just down the road women prisoners are left to sicken and die amid mold, medical neglect and collapsing infrastructure.

The capitalist system possesses the technological and financial capacity to remediate every environmental hazard inside WHV. Instead, the state government forces prisoners like Khaira Howard to physically manage the toxic environment that is killing them, for wages as low as 35 cents an hour. In late May 2026, amid mounting scrutiny over the deaths, the MDOC suspended a corrections employee and abruptly paused all "third-shift special assignments" at the facility, vaguely citing an ongoing investigation into a late-night "cleaning project" involving prisoners.

The deaths of Khaira Howard, Rebecca Fackler, Ashley Hoath and Jennifer Wallace are the result of a system running exactly as designed: Facilities stripped of resources by decades of bipartisan austerity, healthcare handed to private contractors whose profits depend on denying care, and a political establishment at every level committed to maintaining this arrangement.

The fight against the barbarism at WHV is inseparable from the broader struggle against the US prison-industrial complex, including the vast and expanding network of immigration detention centers. More than 60,000 immigrants are currently held in ICE detention, the vast majority with no criminal conviction, forced to languish in similar hellish conditions under the constant threat of deportation.

Resolving the crisis of carceral death requires the expropriation of VitalCore, GEO Group, CoreCivic and every private contractor profiting from human misery; the immediate and comprehensive remediation of environmental hazards; the release of all immigrants detained for deportation; and the abolition of the prison system itself. This is not a question of reforming the machinery of state repression but of dismantling the social order that produces poverty, criminalization, imprisonment and death. It requires the independent political mobilization of the working class to reorganize society on a socialist basis, replacing capitalist punishment and social abandonment with equality, democratic control over social resources and the satisfaction of human need.



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