

Fourth death in 50 days as Michigan Democrats protect prison profiteers

Stephen St. Clair
5 July 2026

Dalephenia Jones, aged 62, died Thursday at Trinity Health Ann Arbor Hospital, becoming the fourth woman incarcerated at the Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility (WHV) to die in less than two months. Jones, who had been serving a life sentence since 1994, suffered a cardiac event in her cell on June 19. She underwent emergency surgery and remained in critical care for fourteen days before succumbing on July 2.

On May 13, 28-year-old Khaira Howard died days before her scheduled parole, having been forced to clean toxic black mold without protective equipment. On May 17, 57-year-old diabetic Rebecca Fackler died after being denied entry to the healthcare unit during a medical crisis. On June 6, 36-year-old Ashley Hoath died of septic shock after guards ignored her pleas for treatment of severe vomiting.

Four deaths in 50 days represent a mortality rate six times the facility’s normal average. They follow the sepsis-related death of 54-year-old Jennifer Jean Wallace in November 2025. These deaths are the result of a system in which decaying infrastructure makes prisoners sick and a profit-driven healthcare model ensures they are denied treatment.

Incarcerated women have reported toxic black mold in showers, vents and sleeping quarters, raw sewage backups and scabies infestations. In a June 2025 order, US District Judge Stephen J. Murphy III described a facility “infested with mold” that “eats through bricks and door frames” and “falls out of air vents.” Inmates lacking basic supplies have been forced to scrub mold with menstrual pads or bare fingernails.

The class-action lawsuit *Paula Bailey, et al. v. Heidi Washington, et al.* was filed in November 2019, alleging gross negligence and severe violations of the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments due to the

facility’s collapsing infrastructure, flooding and pervasive mold. The filing detailed how state officials, including Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) Director Heidi Washington and Warden Jeremy Howard, were notified of these lethal hazards through hundreds of formal grievances but chose to ignore them.

In August 2023, the state was granted qualified immunity regarding all mold-specific claims. Democratic Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel’s office argued that there are “no cases establishing a prisoner’s right to be free from these molds” and that even if certain molds were proven dangerous enough to implicate the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment, it remains legally unestablished that prison officials must take “particular action to remediate it.” In response, plaintiffs amended the complaint to focus on “inadequate ventilation.”

After an evidentiary hearing exposed how the MDOC’s grievance system was designed to block legal recourse by rejecting legitimate complaints, Judge Murphy stripped the defendants of qualified immunity regarding the ventilation claims and ordered discovery to proceed. In response, Nessel’s office filed an appeal to the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in July 2025, which automatically stayed all lower court proceedings and left the lawsuit in procedural gridlock as of July 2026.

The mold, the collapsing ventilation and the raw sewage produce illness; the healthcare system is structured to ensure that illness goes untreated. MDOC medical services are outsourced to VitalCore Health Strategies under a contract valued at nearly \$589 million, set to expire September 30, 2026. This contract operates on a “capitated” funding model: the state pays VitalCore a fixed, per-capita rate for each incarcerated

person, regardless of the actual medical care required. Every denied specialist referral, every delayed diagnostic procedure, every substituted generic prescription directly increases VitalCore's bottom line. In a prison, where patients have no choice of doctor and must navigate a security apparatus simply to reach a triage nurse, the capitated model reliably produces medical neglect.

In Mississippi, the company secured over \$350 million in contracts while understaffing facilities, denying Hepatitis C medication to thousands and allegedly ignoring cancer cases until they became terminal. In Vermont, VitalCore faces a wrongful death lawsuit after nursing staff allegedly watched an inmate die of bacterial endocarditis over several days, ignoring warnings from corrections officers. In Massachusetts, auditors found that clinical contacts between VitalCore staff and high-risk psychiatric patients in solitary confinement lasted less than 60 seconds.

Despite this national record of failure, the administration of Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer has requested an additional \$4.2 million in the Fiscal Year 2026-27 budget to fund a 3 percent increase to VitalCore's contract rates.

The Democratic Party seeks to manage public outrage while leaving the profit-driven machinery of death intact. Following Ashley Hoath's death, US Representative Debbie Dingell issued a public letter to Governor Whitmer expressing "continuing concern" and demanding answers to questions about mold, environmental hazards and medical care. After Dalepheia Jones's death, Dingell issued another statement calling the situation "concerning to everyone." State Representative Laurie Pohutsky and 30 others, both Democrats and Republicans, demanded the resignation of MDOC Director Heidi Washington. On June 23, as Jones lay dying in the hospital, Warden Jeremy Howard was placed on "temporary personal leave."

The Democratic Party is the party effectively in control of the state government. Governor Whitmer and Attorney General Nessel own every death, every denial of care, every day a sick woman is forced to scrub mold with her fingernails.

Formerly incarcerated women and their families formed the Stand Up, SPEAK OUT Coalition, led by the advocacy group Survivors Speak. Operating under

the slogan "Everybody Ain't Lying," the coalition has collected over 60 first-hand accounts of medical neglect and hazardous conditions. On July 4, two days after Dalephenia Jones's death, the coalition organized a demonstration outside the prison facility.

The week of Jones's death, a heat wave placed more than 185 million people under heat alerts. For the women incarcerated at WHV, the heat wave compounds an already lethal environment. The facility's collapsing ventilation systems offer no relief, while prisoners suffering heat exhaustion and dehydration confront a health care system determined to deny them care.

The deaths of Khaira Howard, Rebecca Fackler, Ashley Hoath and Dalephenia Jones are the expression of a system operating precisely as designed. The state houses a vulnerable population in an unventilated oven contaminated by fungal growth, funds healthcare through a model that financially penalizes treatment, and deploys its legal apparatus to argue that prisoners have no established right not to be poisoned. This is social murder as defined by Marxists going back to Friedrich Engels: the predictable, inevitable production of unnatural death by systemic social conditions.

The fight against the barbarism at WHV cannot be separated from the broader struggle against the US prison-industrial complex and the capitalist system that sustains it. Resolving this crisis requires the expropriation of VitalCore and every private contractor profiting from human misery, the immediate and comprehensive remediation of all environmental hazards and ultimately the abolition of a carceral system whose function is the management of poverty and social inequality through caging and neglect.

This program requires the independent political mobilization of the working class, in Michigan and internationally, to dismantle the social order that produces poverty, criminalization, imprisonment and death, and to reorganize society on a socialist foundation in which human need takes precedence over private profit.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact