

Fifth death at Michigan women's prison as families confront Whitmer administration

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Dasie Forbes, 69, died July 23, becoming the fifth woman incarcerated at the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility (WHV) to die since mid-May.

Forbes had been hospitalized since July 11 with what the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) described as "multiple chronic, complex, life-limiting illnesses." She elected to enter palliative care in February. The MDOC classified her death as "expected," and the Washtenaw County medical examiner declined to perform an autopsy.

Forbes's death follows those of Khaira Howard, 28, on May 13; Rebecca Fackler, 57, on May 17; Ashley Hoath, 36, on June 6; and Dalephenia Jones, 62, on July 2. WHV, Michigan's only prison for women convicted of felonies, holds nearly 1,800 people and has averaged six deaths annually since 2022. Five deaths in just over two months represent an annualized mortality rate more than four times that baseline.

Among the women whose deteriorating health has become a focus of public opposition is Krystal Clark, who has been incarcerated at WHV for 16 years. Clark and her family say prolonged exposure to the prison's fungal contamination has caused severe respiratory problems, hearing loss, recurring infections and loss of muscle function on the left side of her face.

"I'm sitting here just suffering, suffering," Clark told WDIV/ClickOnDetroit in April. "In pain every day. Headaches every day. Body breaking out all over my body."

On July 31, Clark's family joined relatives of the women who died and other supporters outside MDOC headquarters in Lansing. Her mother, Izora Clark, told the demonstration: "At the end of the day, I didn't even recognize my own child."

Khaira Howard's father, Don Howard, declared: "She walked into the facility and she didn't walk out. These ladies are walking in, but they're not walking out."

The demonstrators demanded Clark's immediate release, the release of severely ill and medically frail women and an independent investigation into the deaths. As MDOC employees left the building, protesters chanted, "Shame!" and "Blood on your hands!"

The action followed a July 4 protest outside the prison organized by 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 more than 60 firsthand accounts of medical neglect and hazardous conditions.

Crystal Mulherin, who was exonerated in 2024 after being wrongfully imprisoned at WHV, addressed the crisis in an August 3 op-ed in the *Detroit News*.

"The state does not become less responsible for someone's life simply because that person has been convicted of a crime," Mulherin wrote. "In fact, incarceration increases the government's responsibility."

New accounts continue to surface detailing the New testimony from inside the prison has provided further evidence of systematic indifference to medical emergencies.

Tina Stoll, a Prisoner Observation Aide assigned to monitor Khaira Howard during her final days, told Michigan Public that Howard was confined to a wheelchair, unable to feel her legs and repeatedly calling for help.

"They kept calling her a liar," Stoll recalled. "This girl couldn't get out of her wheelchair. She slept in her wheelchair. She stayed in her wheelchair. They just kept telling her she was faking."

During an observation shift, Stoll noticed Howard exhibiting signs of confusion.

"She was sounding like she was hallucinating," Stoll said. "And I said, 'That's weird. What's happening in there?' And then the very next day, she was deceased."

An autopsy found that a blood clot in Howard's right leg had traveled to her lungs. Her blood-oxygen level had fallen into the 70s, depriving her brain of oxygen. Nevertheless, the medical examiner classified her death as "natural."

Renyatta Hamilton first reported irregular periods and heavy bleeding in 2014. According to medical records reviewed by Michigan Public, she spent 12 years cycling through doctor visits, birth-control injections and an intrauterine device without receiving a diagnosis. Only this year did doctors outside WHV identify a mass of tissue in her uterus that may explain the bleeding.

"The healthcare staff is horrible," Hamilton said. "They'll talk to you the same way that the correctional officers talk to you, as if you're not here to help me."

Jamie Hein, a University of Michigan doctoral candidate who

spent 10 years incarcerated while managing a hereditary illness, identified the profit motive underlying the denial of care.

“Their goal is not to deliver quality healthcare,” Hein said. “It’s to provide the least possible amount of care and make the most profit.”

Michigan began contracting out portions of its prison health care nearly 30 years ago. The MDOC continues to employ many nurses, laboratory technicians and psychologists, while private contractors supply physicians, physician assistants, pharmacy services and other personnel.

VitalCore Health Strategies took over Michigan’s prison health care contract in May 2024. The Topeka, Kansas-based company assumed the remaining portion of an agreement originally valued at nearly \$590 million. State documents valued VitalCore’s assignment at approximately \$171.2 million through September 30, 2026, with three one-year renewal options available.

The contract calculates base payments according to the prison population, using a per-prisoner, per-month formula, rather than the treatment required by each individual patient. It also contains a cost-sharing mechanism between the state and contractor. Such arrangements place continuous pressure on both VitalCore and the MDOC to restrict expensive specialist consultations, outside hospitalization, diagnostic testing and medication.

VitalCore has faced lawsuits and investigations in several states over allegations of medical negligence, understaffing and malpractice.

In Mississippi, VitalCore holds a three-year, \$357 million contract. Records showed that only 48 of 845 prisoners with documented hepatitis C diagnoses received treatment during the first three months of 2025, while officials privately estimated that as many as 5,000 prisoners carried the infection. The state also imposed a \$4.6 million clawback on VitalCore for failing to meet staffing requirements. In 2026, the family of Susie Balfour, who died after breast cancer spread while successive prison health contractors allegedly delayed screenings and treatment, reached a settlement with VitalCore.

In Vermont, a wrongful death lawsuit alleges that VitalCore personnel watched Alexander Kelley’s condition deteriorate for days and failed to act even after a corrections officer reported that he had labored breathing, was lethargic and had stopped eating. An autopsy found that Kelley died from bacterial endocarditis.

In Massachusetts, a Department of Correction-commissioned review following six prison suicides in 2025 found that the vast majority of clinical contacts with prisoners held in Behavioral Assessment Units lasted under five minutes, with some lasting less than one minute. VitalCore was the state’s prison health contractor throughout that period.

Despite this record and the five deaths at WHV, the Whitmer administration’s proposed Fiscal Year 2026-27 budget includes

another \$4.2 million for a 3 percent increase in health care and pharmaceutical rates under the integrated prison health contract.

The state has also spent years fighting litigation brought by women incarcerated at WHV over mold, failing ventilation and other dangerous conditions.

In 2023, Democratic Attorney General Dana Nessel’s office argued that there were “no cases establishing a prisoner’s right to be free from these molds.” State attorneys maintained that even if the mold implicated the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment, no clearly established law required prison administrators to take any “particular action to remediate it.”

After the state obtained qualified immunity against the mold-specific claims, the plaintiffs amended their lawsuit to focus on the prison’s collapsing ventilation system. A federal district court subsequently allowed nearly all those claims to proceed. Nessel’s office appealed to the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, automatically staying discovery and preventing the women from advancing their case while the appeal remains pending.

Governor Gretchen Whitmer has likewise shielded the MDOC leadership. After 30 state lawmakers called for the resignation of MDOC Director Heidi Washington, Whitmer refused to remove her, instead ordering a “swift, thorough, and transparent investigation” conducted by the department itself. Warden Jeremy Howard was placed on “temporary personal leave” on June 23, while Dalephenia Jones remained hospitalized in critical condition.

Whitmer, Nessel and the MDOC bear direct political responsibility for maintaining these conditions. They have continued funding the private health care system, defended prison officials against litigation and rejected demands for accountability while women have died.

The families chanting “Blood on your hands” outside MDOC headquarters correctly identified the responsibility of the state. Their struggle requires a political movement equal to the crime.

VitalCore and every private corporation extracting profit from incarceration must be expropriated. All environmental hazards at WHV must be immediately remediated, and every severely ill and medically frail prisoner must be released. These demands must be connected to a struggle against the prison-industrial complex and the capitalist social order that produces poverty, criminalization, imprisonment and death.

Such a movement can be built only through the independent political mobilization of the working class, in Michigan and internationally, to reorganize society on the basis of human need rather than private profit.



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