

Arizona Prisons' Widespread Failings Detailed in Newly Released Reports

Healthcare in Arizona Department of Corrections Facilities Does Not Meet Minimum Standards, Experts Find

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CONTACT: Steve Kilar, ACLU of Arizona, 602-773-6007, skilar@acluaz.org

PHOENIX – Nearly two dozen expert reports that detail widespread problems with the Arizona Department of Corrections' healthcare system, as well as its use of solitary confinement, were made public late Monday.

"I observed locked, dark and empty rooms that I was told were exam rooms, but lacked basic medical equipment," wrote Dr. Robert Cohen, an expert in correctional medicine, in one of his reports (11/8/13 report, page 5). "Medical equipment was broken, covered in dust, and in some cases based on logs attached to them, had not been repaired or checked in more than a decade."

Dr. Cohen found that almost half of people who died "natural deaths" while in ADC's care over a six-month period received "grossly deficient" medical care (2/24/14 report, pages 1-2). Every week, on average, a patient who has been neglected or mistreated dies in the Arizona prison system, according to these expert reports.

"In some of these cases, the poor care clearly caused or hastened their death," Dr. Cohen wrote (2/24/14 report, page 1-2). "It is alarming that almost half of the natural deaths occurring during the brief half year period under review would reveal such significant problems with delivery of basic medical services."

Dr. Cohen uncovered shocking delays in treatment including the case of a 38-year-old prisoner whose death from cancer was avoidable according to ADC's own documents (2/24/14 report, pages 19-25). Another prisoner died of untreated lung cancer after being accused by nurses of lying about his medical condition; they said in his medical records that he was "playing games" and "seeking attention" (2/24/14 report, pages 25-32). A 24-year-old man died of AIDS-related pneumonia after his AIDS went undiagnosed and untreated for a year, despite his pleas for HIV tests and treatment, Dr. Cohen found (2/24/14 report, page 52).

These are not isolated cases. Dr. Cohen's findings, and the findings of the plaintiffs' other experts, point to systemic deficiencies in ADC's healthcare.

“[T]here were multiple cases in which the lapses were so shocking and dangerous that I felt ethically obligated as a medical professional to bring them to the immediate attention of the ADC and Corizon staff,” Dr. Cohen said (11/8/13 report, page 4). Corizon is the company contracted by the state to provide healthcare to prisoners.

The other experts made equally damning discoveries. The 23 expert reports, which were previously confidential, were made public yesterday pursuant to a court order in anticipation of an October trial relating to ADC’s failure to provide more than 33,000 prisoners in 10 prisons healthcare and conditions of confinement that meet constitutional standards.

“[T]he chronic shortage of mental health staff, delays in providing or outright failure to provide mental health treatment, the gross inadequacies in the provision of psychiatric medications, and the other deficiencies identified in this report are statewide systemic problems, and prisoners who need mental health care have already experienced, and will experience, a serious risk of injury to their health if these problems are not addressed,” wrote Dr. Pablo Stewart, another expert hired by plaintiffs’ counsel to tour ADC’s prisons and review prisoners’ medical records, in one of his reports (11/8/13 report, page 10).

Dr. Stewart, a psychiatry professor with expertise in prison mental health care, uncovered numerous preventable suicides by prisoners, lengthy and serious delays in care, insufficient and unlicensed staff and inadequate medication protocols. One prisoner hanged himself after ADC neglected to give him his prescribed mood stabilizing drugs for more than three weeks, Dr. Stewart found (11/8/13 report, pages 21-23).

The reports also detail significant, dangerous problems with ADC’s use of solitary confinement. Some people, for instance, are put in isolation simply because other beds are full (Vail 11/8/13 report, page 9). Mentally ill prisoners are often isolated because ADC does not have treatment alternatives, according to one expert (Vail 11/9/13 report, page 13).

“[T]he ADC health care delivery system is fundamentally broken and is among the worst prison health care systems I have encountered,” Dr. Cohen wrote (11/8/13 report, page 3). “[U]nless ADC dramatically reverses its course, it will continue to operate in a way that harms patients by denying them necessary care for serious medical conditions.”

Plaintiffs in the class action lawsuit, *Parsons v. Ryan*, are represented by the American Civil Liberties Union’s National Prison Project, the ACLU of Arizona, the Prison Law Office, Jones Day, Perkins Coie LLP and the Arizona Center for Disability Law.

A trial is scheduled to begin Oct. 21. More expert reports will be made public prior to the trial.

[The complete reports now available can be found here.](#) Reporters can email the ACLU of Arizona to request report summaries.