

SPLC: Alabama prisons must address staffing needs and accept monitoring of failing mental health treatment

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The Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) must conduct a meaningful analysis of the staffing it needs to address an unconstitutionally inadequate level of care for prisoners who have mental illnesses, according to a [brief](#) filed in federal court yesterday by the SPLC.

ADOC will likely need more than double its current level of correctional staffing and nearly triple its mental health staffing, according to the brief. Additionally, the court should appoint security and mental health monitors to ensure that ADOC is carrying out the court-approved remedies, the brief states.

The filing is in response to a plan that ADOC proposed to the federal court last week, claiming that it would increase spending for mental health care workers – and would double staffing in those positions – but only if the state legislature provides enough funding next year.

“Compliance with the U.S. Constitution is not optional, and the state can delay no longer. Mental health staffing is woefully inadequate in ADOC prisons, and the flagrant constitutional violations that result must be addressed immediately in order to protect prisoners with mental illnesses from an ongoing risk of serious harm,” said Maria Morris, senior supervising attorney with the SPLC. “ADOC’s plan to remedy these glaring staffing deficiencies is vague, unsubstantiated and incomplete. It must address these issues now.”

The filing is the latest development in the SPLC’s ongoing litigation against ADOC for failing to provide adequate medical and mental health care for

people in its custody. U.S. District Court Judge Myron Thompson issued a sweeping, [302-page ruling](#) in June declaring the mental health care system in Alabama prisons “horrendously inadequate.”

The court specifically found that “persistent and severe shortages of mental-health staff and correctional staff” are among the overarching issues that contribute to the inadequacy of mental health care in ADOC prisons.

The court also found that ADOC’s mental health caseload is substantially lower than the national average, and that this failure to identify prisoners with mental health needs is the result of a number of factors, including “insufficient mental-health staffing.”

Recruiting and retaining adequate staff will take time and funding, but ADOC already has the authority and funding to hire some correctional staff right now. For example, ADOC does not need legislative approval to fill its existing, authorized staffing levels.

“Throughout this case, the [court](#) has repeatedly made it clear that lack of funds is not an excuse for ADOC’s failure to provide constitutionally mandated care to prisoners with mental illnesses,” Morris said. “ADOC officials have known for years that they need more staff, but they have delayed addressing the problem. Now, they want to delay even further, leading to more pain, suffering and possibly even death.”

Morris said: “The state has an immediate duty to hire enough qualified staff to address the crisis in care for the mentally ill. Over the long term, however, the only solution to this and other problems in the Alabama prison system is to decrease the prison population by getting people the help they need to stay out of prison in the first place. The state should ensure that people with mental illness get treatment, instead of just locking them up and throwing away the key.”

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