



LISTEN DEEPER

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Are Alabama Prisoners Getting the Mental Health Care They Need?

Posted 03-10-2017 by **Les Lovoy** (<https://news.wbhm.org/author/les/>).

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The Southern Poverty Law Center filed a lawsuit on behalf of Alabama prisoners around inadequate mental health care.

Fatal stabbings and suicides are not at all uncommon in Alabama prisons. And mental health care for inmates has been the focus of a federal trial that lasted two months. In the meantime, those with mental illness continue to cycle through the criminal justice system. At the heart of the recent federal trial under way was a question Southern Poverty Law Center representing prisoners in the trial, says they are not.

“There’s a lot of evidence that there’s just simply not enough mental health staff to do what needs to be done for the mentally ill people in the prison system,” Morris says. “The level of qualification.”

Morris says at least 30 percent of those incarcerated in Alabama have a serious mental illness such as depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Take inmate Jami found hanging from his cell. Morris says one suicide haunts her. During a visit to one prison, she was told a prisoner hanged himself in solitary confinement. “The idea of people begging for help. And no one came.”

Larry Woods, a 20-year veteran of the Federal Bureau of Prisons and a retired clinical psychologist, counseled inmates at Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women. “My shock of all that, the whole tone was it was simply abusive.”

Helping those with mental illness re-enter society is important too. One program sponsored by the state helps inmates, some with mental health issues, transition back to Alabama Therapeutic Education Facility or ATEF. It’s private owned. There are no bars. The guards don’t carry guns. Gary Hetzel is with Community Education Center. “What we try to do here is bring them hope and show them respect,” Hetzel says. “Teach them a new way of thinking and then getting their education so they can come out.”

Mental health advocates and state prison system officials are awaiting the outcome of the federal trial. In the meantime, advocates are working with State Rep. Mike B. “I think that more will end up getting the help they need, rather than landing in prison.”



(<https://news.wbhm.org/media/2017/03/ATEF.jpg>)

The Alabama Therapeutic Education Facility (ATEF) offers a 6-month program for soon-to-be-released Alabama inmates. ATEF says they treat their clients with respect hoping it will change their lives.
Photo by Les Lovoy



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