

One group fights suicide rate among Alabama inmate population

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MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Given the attention he garnered in life, it's no surprise Aaron Hernandez would receive attention when he died. But it's not just his death- it's how he died. The former New England Patriot tight end committed suicide in his Massachusetts jail cell.

Inmate suicide is a growing issue across the country— according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, suicide rates in the nation's jails have recently climbed higher than ever.

Here at home, one group in Alabama has long been advocating for mental health reform in prisons.

"When we send them to prison, we are sending them to prison. They are not allowed to range free in the world. They are not allowed many things. We are not supposed to be sentencing them to the suffering that is untreated mental healthcare," says Maria Morris, an attorney with Southern Poverty Law Center.

Morris is an attorney with the Southern Poverty Law Center. In an on-going lawsuit against Alabama's Department of Corrections, the group alleges inmates are denied proper mental healthcare services.

Inmate Jamie Wallace, serving time on a 25 year murder charge, testified about the lack of mental care he claims he suffered as an Alabama prisoner. Less than two weeks later after his testimony last December, Wallace was found dead, hanging in his jail cell.

"In the last two years, Alabama has gone from having a comparatively low rate of suicide to having what appears to be one of the highest suicide rates in the country in its prisons," says Morris.

We wanted to interview someone from Alabama’s Department of Corrections to ask them what measures are in place inside Alabama prisons to insure that inmates are receiving proper mental health services. They said at this time, though, they would not be granting our request, citing the Southern Poverty Law Center’s current lawsuit as the reason why.

Even as the suit goes on, the SPLC says it’s optimistic the state wants to implement positive change.

“I think we have a commissioner who is interested in making the prisoners better and more compliant with the Constitution,” says Morris.

“Not only inmates, it’s important that every citizen in the United States be afforded proper mental healthcare,” says Henry Parker, executive director of Montgomery Area Mental Health Authority.

Parker says his organization has become active in helping some newly-released prisoners acclimate to life outside prison bars.

“The first year that we ran this pilot program in community corrections, the recidivism rate was about 58%. Of the ones we picked up, the recidivism rate dropped to less than 5%,” says Parker.

Advocates for mental healthcare in prisons point out that while incarceration is about punishment, denying inmates mental health care is inhumane and unconstitutional- regardless of their crimes.

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