

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/federal-court-rules-alabama-prisons-horrendously-inadequate/>

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06.28.17

A federal court ruled yesterday that Alabama fails to provide constitutionally adequate mental health care to people in state prisons, finding that mental health services are horrendously inadequate and have led to a skyrocketing suicide rate among incarcerated people.

In a [302-page opinion](#), the court detailed serious systemic deficiencies, including the failure to identify prisoners with serious mental health needs and inadequate treatment for suicidal prisoners. It found that Alabama prisons discipline mentally ill prisoners for the symptoms of their illnesses and segregate them for prolonged periods. Rather than providing effective treatment, Alabama prisons are warehousing the mentally ill, the court wrote.

Evidence presented during a two-month trial that ended in February demonstrated that the state has shown deliberate indifference to the unconstitutional conditions in state prisons. Officials admitted on the stand that they have done little to nothing to fix problems on the ground, despite their knowledge that those problems may be putting lives at risk, the court found.

The court further found that staffing shortages, combined with persistent and significant overcrowding, contribute to serious systemic deficiencies in the delivery of mental-health care. Alabama is an outlier in its refusal to enact meaningful sentencing reforms to address its [prison overcrowding crisis](#), and so the states prisons continue to hold double (190 percent) their design capacity and have the highest inmate-to-officer ratio in the country.

During the trial, Jamie Wallace testified about the Department of Corrections failure to provide him with treatment, telling the court he received only minimal attention from mental health staff even when he was on suicide watch. Less than a month after he testified, Mr. Wallace [died by suicide](#), alone and unmonitored in his prison cell. The court wrote that Mr. Wallaces case is powerful evidence of the real, concrete and terribly permanent harms that woefully inadequate mental-health care inflicts on mentally ill prisoners in Alabama.

The court ordered the parties to discuss a remedy, emphasizing that given the severity and urgency of the need for mental-health care explained in this opinion, the proposed relief must be both immediate and long term.

The ruling caps the second of three phases of a lawsuit filed in 2014 by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, and the law firms Baker Donelson, and Zarzaur Mujumdar & Debrosse.

For far too long, Alabama prisons have been little more than warehouses where many people struggling with mental illness have been hidden away and abandoned by the state, said Lisa Borden, an attorney with Baker Donelson. Once locked behind prison walls, in deplorable conditions with little or no treatment, any hope for improvement or recovery was lost, and many became more profoundly ill. We look forward to now having the opportunity for our clients to receive real treatment for their illnesses, and to seeing them afforded the basic dignity to which any human being is entitled.

The lack of mental health care in Alabamas prison system is representative of broader systemic failures that subject inmates to unconstitutional conditions. [EJIs federal class action lawsuit](#) on behalf of prisoners at St. Clair Correctional Facility challenges the corrections departments failure to remedy violent conditions there, and violence, abuses, and poor conditions throughout the state prison system prompted an investigation by the [U.S. Department of Justice](#).

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