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HIV meds withheld at Broward jails, ex-inmates contend

BY HANNAH SAMPSON

Kevin Sauve wrote note after note from the Broward County jail to the jail's health services over a period of several weeks:

"I need HIV meds ASAP."

"I still have not received my HIV meds. I am getting sicker every day."

Sauve's health continued to deteriorate until finally a Broward judge ordered his \$500,000 bond for selling pain pills reduced to zero so he could be released to get medical help.

"This is a nightmare," said Sauve, 36, who worked as an admissions officer for Kaplan University before his arrest. "You wouldn't believe how sick I was."

Sauve recently filed suit in federal court against Broward Sheriff Al Lamberti and Armor Correctional Health Services, the company that provides healthcare in the Broward jail system, for violating his civil rights by exhibiting conscious indifference to his serious medical condition.

His attorneys, Greg M. Lauer and Dion Cassata, have also filed a lawsuit on behalf of another man who said he did not get his HIV medications in jail earlier this year. They plan to file suits soon on behalf of other inmates.

"You can't just put them in a corner, warehouse them and ignore them," Lauer said.

A spokesman for the Broward Sheriff's Office would not comment on the suits. BSO spokesman Elliot Cohen also declined to speak generally about treatment of inmates who suffer from HIV and AIDS.

Representatives for Armor, which has contracts with nine counties in Florida, would not comment on the lawsuits. "Armor's healthcare professionals implement the highest standard of care to inmates under their care," spokeswoman Amy Baena wrote in a statement.

The statement also said that Armor uses protocols developed by the American Corrections Association and National Commission on Correctional Health Care.

Those who are HIV positive or have AIDS are typically placed on a regimen of drugs, sometimes called a "cocktail," to keep the disease from progressing. The drugs are supposed to be taken regularly in order to be effective.

Dr. Margaret Fischl, director of the AIDS Clinical Research Unit at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, said that when patients are transferred there, staffers work to find out the medications they are on and continue the treatment. She spoke generally about treating patients who have HIV or AIDS but not specifically about the cases in the lawsuits.

"We don't want patients to interrupt therapy," said Fischl, professor of medicine at the medical school. Sauve, of Fort Lauderdale, was arrested on May 1 for selling pain pills that he had a prescription for; he has pleaded not guilty and is

awaiting trial. When he got to jail, he told the nurse that he had AIDS and described the medications he was taking. A few days later, when he had not received any medications, he made a written request for them.

He did not get the medications he sought at the main jail in Fort Lauderdale or the Sheriff's North Jail in Pompano Beach, where he was moved. Sauve continued to make more requests in writing, according to the lawsuit, detailing the fever, night sweats, weight loss and pain he was suffering.

The lawsuit says the staff at the jail told Sauve that they could not restart his medications without running some expensive tests first -- tests the jail would not pay for. "We don't know how to treat you," is what Sauve recalls being told. He said he was treated with compassion in the court system and by guards and nurses, but that their hands were tied.

The lawsuit alleges that it was the practice of Armor and BSO to refuse the medications "as a cost-saving method of administering medical care" -- a policy that shows "deliberate indifference" to the medical needs of those who are detained in the jail system.

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