

Mentally ill inmates suffering needlessly in Broward jails, report says

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Broward County inmates with serious mental illnesses are suffering needlessly, sometimes without treatment, in inhumane conditions, a report released Thursday said.

Deficient staffing, cursory assessments and prolonged stays in solitary confinement have led to “current and ongoing violations of federal rights,” wrote corrections health care expert Dr. Kathryn Burns.

“The jail mental health staffing levels are insufficient to provide adequate mental health treatment at any level of care: intake, outpatient and residential treatment,” Burns wrote.

The 88-page report was part of federal monitoring of the county’s jails, which has lasted for more than 40 years. It reviewed the care provided by the **Broward Sheriff’s** Office, which oversees four jails, and Armor Correctional Health Services, which is paid to handle inmate health care.

Armor, based in Miami, took over Broward's jail health care contract in 2004, but will be replaced on Sept. 1 by Correct Care Solutions, a sheriff’s office spokeswoman said by email Thursday. The terms of the contract with the Tennessee-based company are still being negotiated, the spokeswoman said.

An Armor spokeswoman said in an email Thursday that the company had no comment on the report and that it “is now focused on a smooth transition to the new medical provider.”

“The company is appreciative of the efforts of a very dedicated medical staff who have served hundreds of thousands of patients since the contract commencement in 2004,” the spokeswoman wrote.

The report discusses issues documented in a 2016 South Florida Sun Sentinel [investigation](#), which found that Armor has left severely mentally ill inmates unmedicated and malnourished despite having the authority to help them.

The Sun Sentinel review of thousands of pages of court, medical and jail records also showed that seven Broward inmates since 2010 killed themselves or suffered dramatic weight loss while they were held alone in cells, despite longstanding concerns about the impact of isolation on people with mental illnesses.

The [federal oversight](#) of Broward jails dates back to 1976, after three inmates filed a handwritten lawsuit. Their case focused on crowding and other mistreatment, became a class-action suit including all future inmates.

In 1979, former U.S. District Judge William Hoeweler concluded the jail was too crowded and medical facilities, sanitation and plumbing were inadequate. The county's jails have been under federal monitoring ever since, [one of the oldest ongoing cases of its kind in the United States](#).

Eric Balaban, of the American Civil Liberties Union, and Cocoa Beach attorney Christopher Cloney, represent inmates in the case.

“Dr. Burns identified problems throughout the continuum of mental health services,” and documented issues in a “dangerously substandard system,” said Balaban, who works in Washington, D.C. for the ACLU’s National Prison Project.

“These men and women do suffer and they can suffer for weeks and months,” he said.

As part of her review, Burns made nine visits to the county's jails, in either 2016 or 2017. She met with inmates, jail mental health staff, and reviewed documents.

Also on Thursday, the attorneys representing the inmates and the sheriff's office asked a federal judge to preliminarily approve a settlement agreement that will call for continued monitoring of the jail system by Burns.

Under the new agreement, the sheriff's office has six months to comply with the requirements, which include continued monitoring by Burns and more robust efforts to get care for severely mentally ill inmates. If the agency makes recommended changes, and stays in compliance for a year, the federal monitoring could end.

“The report identified deficiencies, and made recommendations for improvements,” sheriff's office deputy general counsel Terrence Lynch said in a statement. “While the Broward Sheriff's Office does not agree with all of the findings and characterizations of care in Dr. Burns report, a settlement was reached with Plaintiffs which will provide important benefits to the mentally ill in the jail and will resolve this longstanding lawsuit.”

Col. Gary Palmer, head of the sheriff's office detention department, added in a statement: “It is unfortunate that jail facilities have become the de facto institutions for the treatment and care of the mentally ill in our community. Until a solution is found to this mental health crisis, the Broward Sheriff's Office will continue to provide treatment and care to the mentally ill housed in our jails, and will make the necessary improvements to ensure that they are provided the level of care that they require.”

The deaths of William Herring and [Raleigh Priester](#), two people featured in the Sun Sentinel investigation, were reviewed by Burns and mentioned in the report.

Herring told jailers that God would tell him when to eat, and refused food, drink and mental health medication during his four weeks in custody. Priester refused mental health treatment and was sent to a solitary confinement cell, where he lost 30 pounds in his last month and a half in custody. Issues identified in the care of both men continued, Burns wrote.

Fort Lauderdale attorney Greg Lauer represented the families of Herring, Priester, and [Scott Burrell](#) in lawsuits against Armor. Burrell, whose case was also reviewed by Burns, had bipolar disorder and died after he was found in his jail cell curled into the fetal position, covered in urine, feces and vomit.

Priester's case settled in 2015. Lawsuits for Burrell and [Herring](#) settled in May. All were resolved for confidential amounts.

“Raleigh Priester would not have died, Scott Burrell would not have died and William Herring would not have died if the policies or practices they've agreed to in the settlement were in place when those men were in jail,” Lauer said.

He credited the ACLU and the sheriff's office for the changes agreed to in the settlement.

“It's incredibly progressive, which is something you should want from Broward County. We should be leading the state on this.”

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