Justice Department Sues Mississippi for Discrimination and “Warehousing” of the Mentally Ill

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The state of Mississippi was recently served notice that mental health care is a human right and that discrimination against those with disabilities is illegal. The U.S. Justice Department (DOJ) sued the southern state for allegedly housing people living with mental illness in segregated, government-run hospitals, instead of providing them with the treatment and services necessary to thrive in the community, NBC News reports.

In the landmark lawsuit, the agency accused Mississippi of unnecessarily forcing “hundreds of people a day” to enter the state’s four mental institutions to receive care. The DOJ found that this enforced institutionalization robbed Americans with mental illness of their civil rights by failing to provide them with integrated, community-based mental health services.

“When individuals with mental illness receive the services they need, they are better able to find meaningful work, secure stable housing, build personal relationships, and avoid involvement with the criminal justice system,” said Attorney General Loretta Lynch in a statement about the case. The Justice Department filed the lawsuit after extended negotiations with Mississippi to provide more adequate community services for its mentally ill population fell apart.

In response, State Attorney General Jim Hood acknowledged problems with Mississippi’s mental health system. Currently, he’s pushing for the state to spend millions more dollars on community mental health programs. But the lawmaker also lamented that the state legislature chose to put money toward corporate tax cuts this year rather than health care for the mentally ill.

Now, Mississippi must decide: Will it spend money to fight the case or offer people living with mental illness the integrated community care they deserve?

To learn more about how community-based programs help people living with mental illness thrive, click here.

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