Nevada Budgets $6M to Treat All Prisoners Who Have Hepatitis C

After inmates filed a class action lawsuit, Nevada agreed to treat all prisoners living with hepatitis C.

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Nevada is setting aside $6 million to treat all prisoners living with hepatitis C, a curable liver disease that is more prevalent among people who are incarcerated compared with the population at large. The Nevada Department of Corrections expects to treat all affected individuals by October 2023, reports The Nevada Independent.

In December 2019, two Nevada prisoners filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of all state inmates against the Nevada Department of Corrections claiming that they had been denied treatment for the liver virus, which involves taking a daily tablet for a number of weeks. Nevada's $6 million budget will cover treatment with the daily pill Epclusa (sofosbuvir/velpatasvir), which is taken for 12 weeks at a cost of $17,000 per person.

Last month, prison officials said they had identified 749 cases of hepatitis C out of 11,015 total inmates. Of those who had the virus, 166 were deemed a top priority for treatment.

Hepatitis C virus affects the liver. Over time, it can cause fibrosis (mild to moderate liver scarring), cirrhosis (serious liver scarring), liver cancer, liver failure and death. Hepatitis C is most commonly transmitted through direct blood-to-blood contact, such as by sharing needles and drug paraphernalia; through blood transfusions and organ transplants; through tattoos and, in rarer cases, via sex.

Treating inmates who have hepatitis C, the newspaper points out, not only improves the health of those with the virus but also helps curb the long-term health-related costs to the state, since untreated individuals could transmit the virus to other prisoners and, once released, to the general population.

"It just doesn't stay there in the prison, and it does filter out," Republican Assemblywoman Robin Titus, told the Nevada Independent. "So I'm supportive of treatment and offering hope to these prisoners, because treating is a small investment in other health outcomes, whether it be family members or long-term complications."

Nevada prison officials said they are not testing incoming inmates for hepatitis C, noting that the

virus is more common among the prison population than among people who are not incarcerated.

Click here to learn the Basics of Hepatitis C. And for more about viral hepatitis and other forms of liver disease such as non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), see our Introduction to Hepatitis.

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