Mississippi to End Segregation of HIV-Positive Prisoners

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Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) commissioner Christopher Epps recently agreed to end the state's policy of segregating HIV-positive prisoners from general prison populations. Epps's decision came ahead of an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) report showing the harmful impact of these segregation policies in three states.

Since 1987, MDOC has performed mandatory HIV tests on prisoners entering the system. Those who tested positive were housed together in a segregated unit of Mississippi State Penitentiary. Prisoners living with HIV faced isolation and exclusion, while low-custody prisoners were forced to serve their sentence in more violent and expensive prisons.

The policy change will allow prisoners with the virus to participate in jobs training programs and other previously denied services. In addition, prisoners will no longer be assigned to a segregated HIV unit.

Epps said he would gradually phase in the new desegregation policy for prisoners living in the HIV unit and will form a committee to make individualized placement decisions for each prisoner.

"Commissioner Epps deserves a tremendous amount of credit for making this courageous decision to replace a policy based on irrational HIV prejudice with a policy based on science, sound correctional practice and respect for human rights," said Margaret Winter, associate director of the ACLU National Prison Project.

MDOC's policy change leaves Alabama and South Carolina as the only states that segregate HIV-positive prisoners.

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