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Settlement filed in lawsuit over conditions at Tutwiler Prison for Women

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2004 JUL 24 - (NewsRx.com & NewsRx.net) -- The Alabama Department of Corrections (DOC) has agreed to provide ways to improve health care at Tutwiler Prison for Women under terms of a settlement with an organization representing inmates.

The settlement, which awaits the approval of U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson, calls for a doctor, mental health expert and attorneys and advocates from the Southern Center to monitor the prison for 4 years to ensure the state is following the rules.

The Atlanta-based nonprofit law firm filed the lawsuit in 2002 when Tutwiler had more than 1,000 women in space for about 360. Thompson visited the Wetumpka lockup, called it a "ticking time bomb" and ruled it unconstitutional in December 2002.

DOC spokesman Brian Corbett said the department could not comment on the settlement until Thompson makes it final. This is the third lawsuit involving inmate health care that DOC has settled in June.

The Tutwiler settlement effectively would lower the number of prisoners to 700 by November. If the number rose, the state would have to add officers.

Under the medical terms of the settlement, women entering the prison would be allowed to continue taking prescription medications. And a licensed prison dentist would have to provide dentures when necessary.

The settlement also calls for improved hepatitis treatment, infection control and special care for elderly patients, women with terminal illnesses and women with serious mental health conditions, according to the Southern Center.

"What we've reached is an agreement on a basic framework to keep the prison from being as violent and inhumane as it had become when there were 1,000 women in that prison," said Lisa Kung, an attorney with the Southern Center. "It certainly is not going to make the place comfortable."

The Southern Center, along with DOC staff, will review prisoners' files every 6 months in an effort to move them out of prison and into work release and community corrections programs faster.

Sections of the settlement address heat and pest control, and it would require the state to buy five new ice machines. Tutwiler is not air-conditioned.

Kung said the settlement does not address all of the problems, and the majority of prisoners would be better served in community corrections settings.

"Until Alabama passes genuine sentencing reform, the prison is going to continue being a warehouse," Kung said. "The spotlight now should be on the state of Alabama to take the opportunity to pass meaningful sentencing reform so that they'll be able to keep the population at a manageable level without further court orders."

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