

Illinois Prison Rife with Vermin, Mold, Sewage, Class-Action Lawsuit Alleges

News

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A class action lawsuit filed in the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois reveals the egregious living conditions for approximately 1,000 prisoners at the Northern Reception Center in Crest Hill, the point of entry for most prisoners into the Illinois Department of Corrections prison system.

Hundreds of prisoners reported appalling conditions at the prison, including infestations of rats, mice, flies, and cockroaches; plumbing that frequently spills raw sewage into cells, communal showers, and even the kitchen; and under-cooked, spoiled, and insufficient amounts of food. Additionally, drinking water is brown, often smells like sewage, and Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) testing reveals it has over eight times the maximum contaminant level (MCL) for lead. Prisoners have not received any yard time since November, 2021, meaning they essentially spend all hours of the day, every day, in their squalid cells.

Prisoners are held at the Northern Reception Center in these terrible conditions for months before being transferred elsewhere in Illinois' prison system.

"Entering prison is always going to be a shock," said Alan Mills, Executive Director of the Uptown People's Law Center (UPLC), "but forcing people to endure infestation by vermin, undrinkable water, and extended solitary confinement when they first enter Illinois' prison system is unacceptable and serves no legitimate purpose."

The lawsuit, filed jointly by UPLC and Jenner & Block on behalf of the prisoners, asks the court to declare that the Illinois Department of Corrections is violating the prisoners' constitutionally protected rights and require action to improve conditions in the prison.

"Prison officials have known how bad the conditions are for years but they've chosen to ignore the situation and shuffle prisoners along in the penal system," said Jenner & Block Partner Benjamin J. Bradford. "We want to shine a light on the inhumane conditions at the Northern Reception Center; it's time to amplify prisoners' voices and force change at this facility." Mr. Bradford led the Jenner & Block team along with Partners Terri L. Mascherin and Associates Lindsey A. Lusk and Garrett J. Salzman. Other team members include Alexander E. Cottingham, Emily A. Merrifield, Steven Tinetti, Arianne R. Wilt, and Vincent Wu.

The Uptown People’s Law Center and Jenner & Block are working in partnership on this case as part of Jenner & Block’s five-year pro bono commitment (2021-2025) to provide \$250 million in free legal services to those in need of access to justice.

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