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The Forgotten Floor - CBS4 I-Team Investigation

Part 1

Officials Say The Problem Has Grown 'Out Of Control'



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Reporting

(CBS4 News) MIAMI

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Leifman has relentlessly fought to improve conditions for the mentally ill in South Florida and in this very jail. "This is a bad secret. It's a sad secret," he said.

What most people don't know is that the Miami-Dade Jail now serves as the largest psychiatric facility in the State of Florida. 3 of 9 floors are burgeoning with mentally ill inmates in desperate need of psychiatric treatment, not the type of confinement designed to punish people.

"There are five times as many people in our jail with mental illness than any psychiatric hospital in Florida," pointed out Judge Leifman. "Five times, right here."

Many are sick and will linger in the system, if not get lost for months, in what for some is an abyss of madness, and guess who foots the bill?

Judge Leifman said, "It's a tough place. It's not a great condition for anybody that is sick because it is not conducive for treatment. People with mental illness stay in jail eight times longer than sometime without mental illness for the exact same charge and it cost the taxpayers seven times more to treat him here. It doesn't really accomplish anything here. It's a warehouse."

Judge Leifman pointed out the number of people sleeping in a cell intended for a single mentally ill inmate, gesturing to a steel bunk.

"If you look underneath there is someone sleeping in the back underneath," he said. An elderly man emerged from the dirt and darkness, and judge pointed out the others. "There's one on the floor, underneath the bunk, and one or two standing around waiting for their turn to sleep."

The hands of a 26-year old inmate tremble as he speaks. "This is not a way that you treat human beings. You can't treat human beings this way, no beds, no sheets no mattresses, sleeping on the floor." The man was eager to speak. "Hopefully with your help, people will know what's going on here."

Floor 9, the so-called forgotten floor, houses patients who suffer from the most acute mental illnesses.

"You can see they are not given mattresses either because they are afraid they are going to hurt themselves. This was not built as a psychiatric facility," said Judge Leifman. "It's a jail. And the jail has to do what it can to protect them but at the same time they need treatment and its costing money and lives to do it this way."

Dr. Portier admits the overcrowding and terrible conditions sometimes make him want to scream. "Sometimes yes, but that is how society is now. Jails and prisons have essentially become mental institutions."

How did this happen? According to authorities, there is not one psychiatric care bed available at the few state mental hospitals that remain open in Florida. In fact, there is a 333-person waiting list in the State. Most of the requests are for Miami-Dade County residents, the urban area in the US with the largest percentage of mentally ill people.

While the CBS4 I-Team was in the facility, they saw an inmate being held in the shower. He was not there to bathe.

"They are just holding him in there. There is no where to hold him, that's the shower." Judge Leifman said, noting that Corrections officers simply had no place else to put him. "Just for a few minutes. Because there is nowhere else. There is no where else, there is no room."

"You can't treat human beings this way," says one inmate. "Sometimes we value our society by how we treat the most vulnerable. And I think we are not doing a very good job."

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mates in the mentally-ill ward at the Miami-Dade attempt to drink water from a toilet, after claiming there was no water in their cell.

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mate speaking about brutal conditions at Miami-Dade's cells for the mentally ill, talking through a grate in his door.

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The Miami-Dade Pre-Trial Detention Facility, where mentally ill inmates are held.

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