Massachusetts Woman to Become First to Receive Regular Methadone Treatment in Prison

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A Massachusetts woman has been approved to receive ongoing methadone treatment for her heroin addiction while she serves a sentence in federal prison. The woman will become the first known person to win approval from the US Justice Department?s Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to receive this type of addiction treatment.

This decision by the BOP to provide Stephanie DiPierro with methadone on a regular basis may potentially pave the way for other federal inmates who are also dealing with opioid addiction to receive treatments. Methadone is known to help block cravings, allowing patients to slowly detox. At the same time, this medication also helps avoid painful withdrawal symptoms.

Typically, methadone is given to patients while they are in a rehab facility where they have access to medical supervision 24/7.

DiPierro was due to start her 366-day prison term in April after pleading guilty of charges of defrauding public assistance programs. However, her sentence was delayed after she sued top BOP officials in federal court in

March, saying that the government?s policy of denying her access to medication for addiction treatment would violate her Eighth Amendment rights against cruel and unusual punishment and her rights under the federal law that protects people with disabilities.

?This resolution affirms one basic principle: People suffering from substance use disorder deserve just treatment,? said Carol Rose, executive director of the ACLU of Massachusetts, whose group brought the lawsuit along with lawyers from Goodwin Procter.

A BOP spokesperson did not have an immediate comment on the settlement. The BOP usually restricts federal inmates from access to medications used to treat drug addiction such as methadone, buprenorphine, and naltrexone. While in federal prisons, only pregnant women, inmates needing pain management, and inmates undergoing detox treatment can receive methadone. However, they still cannot use it for ongoing treatment.

Despite prohibiting federal inmates from receiving medication for addiction treatment, the Justice Department has taken steps to pressure state prisons to provide access to the same treatments. Last year, the top federal prosecutor in Massachusetts launched a probe into the state?s prison system for violating the American with Disabilities Act by denying inmates access to drugs to treat opioid addiction.

The current opioid epidemic is devastating the country, with over 130 Americans dying from opioid-related overdose every day. In 2017, US government data shows that prescription pain treatments, heroin, and Fentanyl led to 47,600 deaths.

Opioid-related deaths are even higher among those who are recently released from prison. This is due to the tendency of addicted individuals to relapse shortly after getting out of prison and then overdosing. Their bodies developed less tolerance for the drugs over the course of their stay that it easily overdoses even with smaller dosages.

In DiPierro?s home state of Massachusetts, one study revealed that opioid-related overdose deaths are 120 times higher for inmates released from prison or jail, compared with the regular adult population.

Whether or not BOP will elect to make drug addiction treatment available to all opioid-addicted inmates remains to be seen. Click the link to see Mesa's top rehab placement programs.

A handful of federal court cases involving state or local prisons that denied access to substance abuse treatments could give all inmates hope. DiPierro?s treatment could be the beginning of new hope for inmates dealing with opioid addiction.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid or alcohol addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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