

Correctional facilities Inmates to be tested for mental illness

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A settlement reached Tuesday could result in significant changes to the way inmates with mental illness are treated in the Ontario's correctional facilities.

Christina Jahn, a woman with mental illness, addictions and cancer, filed an application with the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario alleging that she was placed in segregation for 210 days at the Ottawa–Carleton Detention Centre because of her mental–health disabilities.

Ms. Jahn also alleged the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services discriminated against her by failing to accommodate her mental–health–related needs.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission intervened in Ms. Jahn's case to address the systemic issues that led to her not receiving appropriate mental–health services and being placed in segregation.

As a result of a settlement with Ms. Jahn, the ministry will review how to best serve women inmates with mental illness, and also put in place mental–health screening for all inmates.

The ministry also agreed to ensure people who need treatment plans and mental–health services have access to them, and will train front–line staff and managers on mental–health issues and human–rights obligations.

The ministry is to prepare a report for the commission within 18 months on how best to serve female inmates with major mental illness. The report will consider various options, including "creating secure treatment units for inmates with major mental illness in existing facilities, and incorporating a secure treatment unit for inmates with major mental illness into all new correctional facilities built on or after 2014," the settlement says.

It also says a treatment plan will be developed for inmates who screen positive for mental–health issues, while those with major mental–health issues will be referred to a psychiatrist as soon as possible.

According to the settlement, the ministry also is committed to changing its policies to only use solitary confinement or segregation for inmates with mental–health disabilities as a last resort.

"Segregation for inmates with mental illness shall not be used unless the ministry can demonstrate alternatives to segregation have been considered and rejected," the settlement states.

Many studies have reported the damaging psychological effects of segregation, particularly on inmates with mental illness, the commission said Tuesday.

"Christina Jahn's experience confirms that the lack of accessible treatment and programs can have terrible consequences for female inmates with mental illness," chief commissioner Barbara Hall said.