

Los Angeles Daily News

Lawsuit cites epidemic in county jails

Infections affect thousands

By Troy Anderson
Staff Writer

Thursday, April 07, 2005 - Three Los Angeles law firms filed a federal class-action lawsuit against the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department alleging that unsanitary and overcrowded conditions led to an epidemic involving more than 4,000 inmates who contracted highly contagious staph infections, officials said Wednesday.

The lawsuit also alleges that the sheriff illegally failed to provide sanitary conditions for inmates, which contributed to the spread of the disease from the jails to the community.

"They are forced to sleep on the floors or on benches without bedding material," said Los Angeles lawyer Cynthia Anderson-Barker. "They eat and sleep in vermin-infested and unsanitary and unsafe conditions. They sleep on the floor close to where the toilets are overflowing. It all facilitates the spread of infectious diseases."

The lead attorney in the lawsuit, Barry Litt, won a record \$27 million settlement against Los Angeles County in 2001 in an unrelated lawsuit filed on behalf of 400,000 jail inmates who were held beyond their release dates.

Sheriff's spokesman Steve Whitmore said county attorneys "will review the lawsuit and respond accordingly."

Officials in the County Counsel's Office declined to comment until they had read the lawsuit, which was filed Tuesday.

In January, Los Angeles County health officials said methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus was spreading rapidly in the jails and the community. They said it posed a growing threat to public health.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says it's caused by bacteria that produce skin infections that can cause painful boils and may result in pneumonia and bloodstream infections. The infections can recur even after they have gone away or been treated with antibiotics.

The number of jail inmates infected with it rose from 921 in 2002 to 2,480 in 2004, according to county figures.

"Inmates exposed to MRSA may carry this disease into the community," county Public Health Officer Dr. Jonathan E. Fielding wrote in a report to the Board of Supervisors. "The degree to which inmates spread MRSA to the community is unknown."

Fielding wrote that medical officials throughout the county and nation have reported seeing increases in the infections in the general community.

Sister Teresa Lynch, a Roman Catholic nun at the St. John Fisher Parish in Rancho Palos Verdes who helps run a "Puppies in Prison" program, said she may have contracted MRSA from an inmate at a Chino women's prison. She helps women at the prison train guide dogs for disabled people.

"I had to be put on antibiotics for 10 days and it went away," she said.

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