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Grant Awarded to Study Improving Health Care for Imprisoned Seniors



Data from the Prison Policy Institute shows that of the approximately 1 million inmates in state prisons across the United States, one in eight, or 13%, is older than 55. (Adobe Stock)



Mark Richardson, Producer



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Longer sentences handed out for major crimes in Michigan and other states over the past few decades mean a larger portion of people in state and federal prisons are older adults. However, [research](#) from the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University finds senior inmates with special health needs are not getting the care they need. The study finds that half of all people in prison have at least one chronic health condition, such as hypertension, diabetes, heart disease or arthritis.

Rodlescia Sneed, an associate professor at Wayne State University, said without intervention these conditions will worsen as the prison population ages.

"What you'll see in most correctional systems is that they have programming focused on mental health, they have programming focused on substance abuse, but there really isn't a lot of deliberate attention to chronic disease," Sneed explained.

Sneed will use those funds to study the effectiveness of an existing program called the Chronic Disease Self-Management Program, which she explained is used primarily in community settings and has improved health care communications, reduced ER visits and hospitalizations, and decreased health-care spending.

The National Institutes of Health grant is \$600,000 over five years, and Sneed said she is applying for an additional grant to scale up the program for widespread use in state prisons in Michigan and other states to maximize its effectiveness. She said she is particularly interested in how prisons adapt chronic disease management programs to reflect the unique constraints of incarceration.

"What we want to do is talk to them about their experiences in implementing this program such that we can develop a scalability plan, so a plan for how we would actually implement this program on a large scale." she continued. "And that's what we would test in a future study."

Sneed added incarceration is already expensive. In 2013, the Federal Bureau of Prisons spent \$881 million dollars to care for older prisoners, an amount that continues to rise exponentially.

"I think prisons are under-resourced in general, and so they try and do the best that they can in terms of managing health-care issues, but there's always an opportunity to do better," she said.

References: [A deep dive into state prison populations Prison Policy Initiative 4/2022](#)