

Trump-Era DOJ Ended Legal Actions Over Civil Rights Violations in Prisons and Mental Health Facilities

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The Department of Justice (DOJ), during President Donald Trump's administration, paused lawsuits concerning alleged civil rights violations in Louisiana prisons and South Carolina mental health facilities. Although the legal actions were later reinstated during the Biden administration, the initial pause drew scrutiny from civil rights advocates. The cases

involved prolonged imprisonment beyond release dates and the institutionalization of mentally ill individuals in settings deemed overly restrictive under federal law.

According to DOJ findings and public records, Louisiana's prison system held hundreds of inmates past their scheduled release dates, some for weeks, others for over a year, despite prior warnings to address the issue. In South Carolina, the DOJ alleged that the state routinely institutionalized individuals with severe mental illness instead of providing community-based services, a practice that may violate federal requirements for care in the least restrictive environment.

The Biden administration filed lawsuits against both states in December, citing longstanding noncompliance following years of federal oversight and attempted reform. In February, federal judges granted temporary stays in the lawsuits at the request of the states, with support from the DOJ, reflecting a possible shift in strategy during the transition period.

Legal observers have noted that the suspensions and the broader trend of reduced federal intervention during the Trump administration reflect a more restrained role for the DOJ in civil rights enforcement. Starting in early 2017, the DOJ under President Trump reduced oversight efforts, including ending some investigations into racial discrimination and police misconduct and limiting the use of consent decrees, court-enforced agreements aimed at reforming law enforcement agencies.

While the DOJ's retreat from these civil rights cases aligned with the administration's emphasis on local governance and limited federal intervention, critics argue that the change left some of the country's most vulnerable populations without adequate protection. Nevertheless, the lawsuits filed under the Biden administration mark a renewed federal push to enforce compliance with civil rights standards in both criminal justice and mental health systems.

The Department of Justice continues to monitor the legal proceedings, and any long-term solutions will depend on the outcomes of these cases and potential policy shifts under future administrations.