AIDS inmate back in hospital

Warden is critical of delays in treating prisoner

By KEITH LAWRENCE
Advocate staff writer

After much effort, officials at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women managed to get an inmate with AIDS hospitalized on Wednesday.

Prison officials said they tried to get inmate Rosalina Pozo admitted to Earl K. Long Memorial Hospital because she had been in pain and steadily losing weight. But after a 10-hour visit on Friday, three emergency room doctors ruled that she did not need to be hospitalized.

Instead, she was returned to her isolated room in the institute's infirmary.

On Wednesday, during a regularly scheduled appointment at Charity Hospital in New Orleans, doctors decided to admit Pozo because of her weight loss and her confused state of mind, reported Deputy Warden Nellie Fanguy.

The episode has left Warden Johnny Jones angry and confused.

He said he cannot understand why Earl K. Long did not admit Pozo on Friday, or why Pozo, who had been at Charity Hospital before being transferred to the correctional facility in September, had not been kept at Charity in the first place.

“If she had been famous or if she had been rich, if she had money or authority or power, she wouldn't be kicked around like a football,” Jones said. “She is 69 pounds and apparently dying. She should not have to go through what she has been going through.”

According to prison records, Pozo, a 47-year-old New Orleans woman, was convicted of possession of marijuana.

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with intent to distribute on May 3, 1984, and sentenced to 10 years in jail. Records indicate she had one previous felony conviction.

Pozo began serving her sentence in Orleans Parish Prison, records indicate, and was placed in Charity Hospital on Aug. 29, 1985, after she had been diagnosed as having AIDS. Because she was a prisoner, a security guard was stationed outside her hospital room.

Records at the hospital and the prison differ as to when she was transferred from Charity to the state facility at St. Gabriel, but it occurred either in mid-September or late September.

Joy Phillips, director of public relations at Charity, said Pozo was transferred because "she did not require acute medical care." "People think that you need to be hospitalized all the time when you have illnesses (like AIDS), but that's not the case," Phillips said.

After being transferred to the institution, Pozo's weight dropped from 92 to 69 pounds, Fanguy said.

Kathryn Gallagher, the institute's director of treatment, said that Pozo is suffering from a fungus infection of the mouth and esophagus, which makes it difficult for her to swallow. Gallagher said that the AIDS virus, which weakens the body's immunization system, prevented Pozo's body from fighting the fungus.

Pozo also has recurring headaches and diarrhea and must receive a lot of fluids or she might become dehydrated, Gallagher said.

Pozo was in pain during most of her stay at the institute, and she was given painkillers regularly, Gallagher said. She spent much of her time there asleep.

According to Fanguy, Dr. Tam Nguyen, the prison's medical director, decided last week that Pozo needed to be hospitalized so she could receive round-the-clock nursing care and intravenous feedings, services that the institute's medical staff is not equipped to provide.

"Dr. Tam felt that the woman's condition has gotten worse and that she required 24-hour nursing care," Fanguy said.

So on Friday morning, Nguyen called Earl K. Long Hospital to make sure it would be convenient for Pozo to be checked out later that day.

About 5 p.m. Friday, Pozo arrived at Earl K. Long in an ambulance provided by the Hunt Correctional Facility.

According to Fanguy, hospital workers put Pozo in a waiting room outside the emergency room, fed her through intravenous tubes and made her sit there for at least 10 hours before telling her she would not be admitted.

Cal Bankston, the hospital administrator, and Margaret Bishop, the hospital's director of nursing, said Pozo received adequate care at Earl K. Long. They also said that her entire stay was spent inside the emergency room.

Bankston, reading from Pozo's chart, described her treatment that night as follows:

- 5:02 p.m., Pozo was admitted.
- 5:10 p.m., vital signs taken.
- 5:20 p.m., intravenous feeding started; blood samples drawn; X-rays ordered.
- 6:05 p.m., pain medication administered.
- 6:30 p.m., pain medication administered.
- 7 p.m., seven laboratory tests ordered; spinal tap conducted (to test for meningitis).
- 1:10 a.m., pain medication administered; intravenous feeding discontinued; patient discharged.

Bankston said that three doctors conferred on Pozo's case before she was discharged.

"From all I can tell, everything was appropriate," Bankston said. "They (the doctors) got all the information needed and made the best judgment they could."

Added Bishop: "We treat AIDS patients like anyone else. That's what's sort of shocking (about Warden Jones' charges). It doesn't make any difference here if you have AIDS or not."

But Jones does not buy that. He said that Charity, and later Earl K. Long, shirked their responsibility of caring for Pozo solely because she has AIDS.

"If she was stricken with anything other than AIDS, she would still be there," Jones said before Pozo was readmitted to Charity. "Everyone is running scared. It's the hysterics surrounding AIDS."

He said that the hospitals have the ability to transfer patients convicted of crimes to the institute, but the institute does not have the luxury of sending them back.

"She's got no money, she's poor, so what the hell. Who cares?" Jones said.

"It's disgusting, if you ask me personally. She's no less human than anyone else."