

Tax dollars pay for prisoner health care

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Only one segment of the Texas population is guaranteed healthcare by the Constitution — prisoners. As prisoners grow older, the cost of their health care goes up and you, the taxpayers, are going to have to pay the bill.

"I've had a gallbladder that's been a nightmare," Texas prisoner Philip Joseph Poe said.

After his operation Poe, 64, said he's going to be OK. His gallbladder was removed last month at the state's prison hospital in Galveston.

"After many years the parole board decided that I need to do three more years. So, I'm just waiting," Poe said.

All Poe can do is wait, either to die or get out, whichever comes first.

It's a reality long-timers must face: growing old, getting sick and dying behind bars.

"Unlike what we see in the movies about this kind of young gang-bang type group of healthy inmates, that really isn't the case," said Dr. Own Murray of The University of Texas-Medical Branch.

Murray oversees the correctional care program for at the hospital. It receives \$7.61 a day to care for most inmates, the price is about 8 times higher for a prisoner over the age of 55. Nearly 10,000 inmates over age 55 get treated at the hospital.

Inmate Walter Lee Usher is confused and doesn't remember much, not even his age, doctors said.

"My age is 19 and 43, no, no 42," Usher said.

Healthcare for the older inmates adds up to more than \$2 million a year. That money comes from taxes. Taxes pay for hospital staff, equipment and medical and eye exams for inmates.

"They have a Constitutional right to healthcare, the only group in this country that has a Constitutional right to healthcare," Murray said.

The prison hospital is preparing to treat more patients like Poe and Usher because a now youthful prison population is serving long sentences and will eventually get old and sick, but these are not people the parole board will release based on age. Sometimes keeping them locked up is the best option.

"They don't have families. They don't have homes to go to. It really is a troubling question, where do you put these people even if you were going to let them go?" Murray said.

The increasing number of older prisoners means UTMB will have to ask state lawmakers for more money to meet the needs of its correctional care program.

