

Suit alleges Cook County detainees secretly monitored in bathrooms in holding cells at courthouses



The Leighton Criminal Court Building in 2012. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

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A proposed class-action lawsuit alleges that the Cook County sheriff's office requires its deputies to monitor by video camera all detainees using bathrooms in holding cells at courthouses.

The suit, filed Wednesday in federal court, said the detainees are kept in the holding cells while waiting to go to bond court soon after their arrests.

The suit alleges that hidden cameras give an unobstructed view of the toilets and that both male and female deputies monitor the video whether the detainees are men or women.

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ants and alleges the monitoring violates
rprivacy.

Cara Smith, Dart's chief policy officer, "vehemently" denied that hidden or secret cameras are focused on detainees in the toilet areas of holding cells at courthouses.

"Fixed cameras are present in the holding cells in courthouses as a critical tool to ensure the safety of staff, the safety of detainees and transparency of our operations," Smith said in an emailed statement.

At a news conference, one of the four named plaintiffs said she learned of the alleged monitoring from a friend whom she identified as a sheriff's deputy. Michelle Urrutia, 46, said she had been detained in a holding cell for an appearance on a misdemeanor traffic charge at the Leighton Criminal Court Building at 26th Street and California Avenue.

"You know we can see everything in the holding cell, including you guys using the washroom?" Urrutia said the deputy told her at a recent party.

Another plaintiff, Elizabeth Alicea, 41, said she spent about 12 hours in the holding cell at the same courthouse following a shoplifting arrest and used the bathroom a couple of times.

"I was very embarrassed, humiliated and upset," she said.

Attorney Thomas Zimmerman Jr. questioned the security claims made by the sheriff, saying the detainees had been searched twice before being placed in the holding cells.

"People have an expectation of privacy regardless if they're in the sheriff's custody," he said. "They don't know they're being monitored."

Zimmerman, who said the women have not seen any video of themselves, said he will seek to stop sheriff's officials from discarding any video footage after 30 days.

The suit also seeks to halt the alleged monitoring and compensate the detainees for "their humiliation and embarrassment."

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