

The Anniston Star

https://www.annistonstar.com/opinion/editorials/money-for-alabama-prisons-is-a-priority/article_8ac63166-aed9-11e7-8boe-c70c99938309.html



Money for Alabama prisons is a priority

By the editorial board of The Anniston Star 14 hrs ago

Alabama's prisons are overcrowded, improperly staffed and beset with a damning and inhumane collection of inadequacies. The chore of solving those dilemmas falls directly in the laps of the state Legislature and Gov. Kay Ivey.

That blunt viewpoint comes from the state Department of Corrections, which this week submitted a plan to U.S. District Court Judge Myron Thompson that details the agency's fix for one of the prisons' worst ailments — the care of inmates with mental health issues.

Earlier this year, Thompson ruled in favor of plaintiffs who claimed Alabama does not offer adequate mental-health care to inmates. In June, he wrote that "(E)ven when identified, mentally ill prisoners receive significantly inadequate care ... ADOC does not provide hospital-level care for those who need it." Only three of the state's 15 major DOC facilities are treatment hubs for mentally ill inmates, according to the court.

The DOC wants to drastically increase the size of its staff, which would include as many as 125 new employees to address the needs of mentally ill inmates. The cost for the mental-health additions: more than \$10 million annually. But there's a problem.

Money, or lack thereof.

Alabama's non-education bank accounts aren't bloated with extra cash, and the state's Republican-majority lawmakers are allergic to discussions about new revenue streams or new or increased taxes. Their methods are consistent: cut allocations to state departments, trim costs and hope found money — BP oil-spill settlement cash, for instance — arrives in the mail.

That's not good enough. That's fact, not spin. Alabama's government-on-the-cheap routine gives the state exactly what it pays for — not enough state troopers, too few state crime labs, reduced courthouse hours and, in this case, poorly funded and managed state prisons.

That's why DOC lawyers embedded these passages in the plan they filed this week with Judge Thompson:



“This Plan will necessarily require the expenditure of funds, which do not currently exist within ADOC’s fiscal year 2017-2018 budget. Therefore, in the event that the Court adopts all or any portion of ADOC’s Plan (or any derivation thereof), ADOC cannot begin performance of any such requirements until submission and approval of budgetary requests by the Alabama legislature and Governor — neither of whom are parties to this action ...

“ADOC submits this Plan expressly contingent upon receipt of adequate funds from the Alabama legislature to fund the efforts and activities set forth this Plan.”

In fairness, Gov. Ivey and this version of the Legislature did not create this crisis. It’s the result of a generational failure by state government to properly fund its prisons and a justice system that locked up too many non-violent inmates who would have been better served by alternative sentencing practices.

But this is their problem now. The only choice — the proper choice — is to jettison the state’s failed methods and summon the political bravery to adequately fund Alabama’s prisons.