

TOP STORY

## Our View

# It's now or never on mental health

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### The Issue

The Legislature year in and year out fails to deal with its underfunded mental health system. The lack of mental health services for the public contributes to the need for it in the state's prisons, where mental health services are also totally inadequate. Yet the Legislature's past behavior indicates not even a court finding will make lawmakers act.

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The definition of insanity, according to a glib saying that has become cliché, is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.

That in mind, how might one describe the Alabama Legislature, whose members time and again refuse to adequately fund mental health services, leaving many people with mental illnesses to suffer until they run afoul of the criminal justice system? And how might one describe lawmakers who continue to underfund the state's prisons, where many of those with mental problems end up? Do they think these issues will resolve themselves? Year after year, the issues remain.

But here is the twist: Our state lawmakers didn't expect a different result. They expected exactly the result they got, which was a federal judge finding the state prison system's mental health services woefully inadequate.

Last week, U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson ruled in favor of inmates who sued the Alabama Department of Corrections in 2014, claiming that untreated mental conditions and lengthy prison lockdowns were leading them to experience more symptoms, violence and suicides.

Thompson could hardly have ruled otherwise. One of the inmates who testified took his own life shortly afterward.

Addressing the prisons' mental health shortcomings — and not even dealing with crowding — may cost state taxpayers \$25 million to \$27 million a year, according to state Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster.

"We're going to have to hire more mental health workers, and we're going to have to have some place for them to work," Ward said.

In his ruling, Thompson said Alabama had failed to identify and treat prisoners with mental illnesses, provide adequate mental health staff and services, and adequately identify and monitor suicidal inmates. He called the mental health care "horrendously inadequate."

This doesn't even address the issue at the local level, where people with mental health issues often cannot find proper treatment and end up having sometimes tragic run-ins with law enforcement.

Police and sheriff's departments in north Alabama long have had to deal with people who would be better served by trained mental health professionals. Even with proper training, law enforcement officers are the last people we should want having to deal with those with mental problems — problems that a tense confrontation with law enforcement can easily exacerbate.

It's not just prison health care that's underfunded. Mental health at the local level, for people who have committed no crimes, is underfunded as well. This is bad not only at a personal, humanitarian level but at a fiscal one. Treating mental illness is cheaper than housing inmates.

So, what is the Legislature to do?

"Right now, money is an issue," said Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Daphne. "We've got to figure out what will satisfy the court and how much it will cost. Can we afford it, or do we need to try to figure out how to release these prisoners? At some point, you can't afford to arrest people. ... Is the court trying to force us to release mentally ill, violent prisoners, or raise taxes?"

State lawmakers are unlikely to raise taxes in an election year. And if all that are left in the state prisons are "mentally ill, violent prisoners," then releasing them will do no good. They'll soon be back in jail, although the state might buy a little time while they're free or in county lockups. That's kicking the can down the road again, if only a few inches, just as the Legislature has done so many times in the past.

Alas, perhaps expecting anything else is insane.