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Corrections seeks \$80 million increase over two years

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Facing major challenges and questions about delivery of health care to inmates, the Alabama Department of Corrections will seek a \$30 million increase in its current budget and \$50 million in fiscal year 2019.



(Photo: Albert Cesare / Advertiser)

ADOC commissioner Jeff Dunn told state legislators at a hearing Thursday morning that the requests would go toward improvements in health care and salary changes that they hope would help the department hold onto skilled correctional officers and improve staffing that in some prisons has fallen to 30 percent of expected levels.

"Think of where we were last year," Dunn said after the hearing. "The issues were similar. I would argue they've continued and deteriorated."

Dunn said the system could need as many as 1,000 correctional officers to meet staffing needs. The request has the urgency [of a federal ruling behind](http://story/news/2017/06/27/federal-judge-rules-against-adoc-mental-health-suit/431798001/) ([/story/news/2017/06/27/federal-judge-rules-against-adoc-mental-health-suit/431798001/](http://story/news/2017/06/27/federal-judge-rules-against-adoc-mental-health-suit/431798001/))it ([/story/news/2017/06/27/federal-judge-rules-against-adoc-mental-health-suit/431798001/](http://story/news/2017/06/27/federal-judge-rules-against-adoc-mental-health-suit/431798001/)), but also faces the

challenges of requesting funding from the perpetually cash-strapped General Fund.

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Legislators — who have the final say over the state's two budgets — were not unsympathetic to the request, but many questioned whether alternate approaches, such as after funding mental health care generally or using technology, would be more effective. House Ways and Means General Fund chair Steve Clouse, R-Ozark, suggested the state begin to seriously explore home confinement for nonviolent offenders.

"The technology's there," he said. "You can draw an invisible line around a building or a house, and if someone crosses that line with an ankle bracelet on, the siren goes off."

Corrections is slated to get \$413 million in the current year. While reforms approved by the Legislature in 2013 and 2015 helped cut overcrowding from about 185 percent in early 2015 to about 159 percent last September, the system continues to face major challenges, including understaffing and violence.

Inmates have also sued the system over the state of health care in the prisons. In a decision last June, U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson called the system's mental health care system "horrendously inadequate" and ordered the state and the plaintiffs to come up with a solution.

Corrections is currently finalizing [a health care contract with Wexford Health Sources](http://www.southunionstreet.com/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/12/15/doc-negotiate-wexford-over-prison-health-care-contract/955739001/) that it says will increase health funding 30 percent, used to hire more medical and mental health care staff.

Rep. Kyle South, R-Fayette, asked about Wexford's role in a Mississippi prison bribery scandal in which a former Mississippi prison commissioner was convicted of steering contracts to a consultant. Wexford, which paid consulting fees to the consultant, said last month it cut off its relationship with the consultant as soon as it learned of the charges.

The commissioner said the situation showed the lack of options in prison health care, and said all the vendors who bid on the contract had strengths and weaknesses.

"Do I have concerns about the current vendor? Only with respect to the fact they are entering an environment that is exceptionally challenging," he said. "The key issue with these vendors is oversight."

Dunn said \$21 million of the \$30 million request for the current year would go toward implementing the health care contract; the commissioner said he expected most of that money to go to hiring about 277 additional staff members for the contract. Another \$3.6 million would go toward required facility adaptations, and \$5.1 million as "pay differentials" to encourage officers to work in high-security facilities.

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The department's \$50 million request for fiscal year 2019, which starts Oct. 1, would put \$36 million into health contract and put \$14 million toward retaining and recruiting corrections staff. Dunn said that \$14 million would not be enough to meet the full staffing needs of the system.

"We don't know what level of compensation is needed to fully staff the system," he said.

Maria Morris, managing attorney for the Southern Poverty Law Center, which represented inmates in the lawsuit, said after the hearing the health contract currently being negotiated was "a good start" to address mental health care shortfalls, but said it was unlikely to address the needs of the system.

"One of the main causes of the inadequacy of mental health care is the lack of correctional staff is really dire," she said. "It's frankly shocking."

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