

Ivey reviewing task forces, including those on opioids, grocery sales tax

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Published 3:37 p.m. CT May 22, 2017 | Updated 4:23 p.m. CT May 22, 2017

Gov. Kay Ivey and her legal team are reviewing established task forces to determine which ones are “needed and necessary,” spokeswoman Eileen Jones said Monday.

“All of the task forces are under review,” she said. “The governor has not made a decision on which ones will continue functioning.”

The review includes a task force set up by former Gov. Robert Bentley to address the state’s high rates of opioid addiction – which has already [had an organizational meeting](http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/01/24/opioid-council-urged-see-addiction-personal-terms/97002076/) – and another task force aimed at studying the state’s sales tax on groceries.

The grocery sales tax task force [had a June 1 deadline](http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/02/21/0223-mgm-sales-tax/98214656/) to deliver a report on ways to end the unpopular 4 percent state levy. Alabama is one of a handful of states that provides no sales tax exemptions on groceries, which in Montgomery County – with city and county taxes added – adds an additional 10 percent cost to food shopping.

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A family in the county spending \$150 a week for groceries pays a total of \$780 in taxes. Eliminating the state share of taxes would save that family \$312, or more than two weeks’ worth of groceries.

It is not clear if the task force met after Bentley signed an executive order establishing it in February. Amid a general cabinet shuffle, Ivey replaced Alabama Department of Revenue Commissioner Julie Magee, who chaired the task force, earlier this month with Vernon Barnett, previously counsel for the Alabama Department of Environmental Management.

Rep. John Knight, D-Montgomery, a member of the task force and long-time advocate of removing the state sales tax, said Monday he was not sure if the task force ever met, saying the busy legislative session – featuring a lengthy battle over redistricting -- consumed his time. Knight said he would continue to push legislation to remove it.



Alabama Governor Kay Ivey claps as Lincoln Police Officer Zack Tutten is presented with the Legislative Medal of Honor for Law Enforcement before a joint session of the legislature on the house floor at the Alabama Statehouse in Montgomery, Ala. on Thursday April 20, 2017. (Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)

"I think the task force would be good in terms of figuring out what variations would be acceptable," he said.

The Alabama Council on Opioid Misuse and Addiction, established in December by Bentley, aimed at getting a grip on addictions to the medications. Alabama's deaths for drug overdose grew nearly 20 percent between 2013 and 2014, and according to a report by The Associated

Press and the Center for Public Integrity. There were 1.2 opioid prescriptions for each resident of Alabama in 2015, compared to a national average of 0.71 percent.



Gov. Robert Bentley signs an order on Tuesday, February 21, 2017 establishing a task force to look at repealing the state sales tax on groceries. (Photo: Brian Lyman / Advertiser)

The council has had two meetings since Bentley signed the executive order, and Jones said it would “probably” continue, though she said Ivey had not made a decision. Dr. Tom Miller, the State Public Health Officer and co-chair of the council, said members were working on proposals, advancing on a broad front of data collection and policy recommendations to address the public health crisis.

"We're also waiting on the governor's guidance, and we fully understand she has a totally full plate," he said.

The Council does not have a timeline to report. "We certainly want to pull that together sooner rather than later," Miller said. "It's such a crisis facing the nation."

Like other governors, Bentley established a number of task forces during his six years in office, which studied everything from [commercial lending reform \(/story/news/local/alabama/2016/06/15/new-task-force-takes-payday-lending/85925466/\)](#) to [addressing rural health \(/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2015/11/18/bentley-task-force-expand-medicaid-alabama/75992648/\)](#) to studying the state's [gambling laws \(/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2016/10/03/bentley-forms-gambling-advisory-council/91464858/\)](#).

The Legislature also has the power to establish task forces. The most noteworthy in recent years, the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force, developed a major corrections package in 2015 that appears to be helping address the state's prison overcrowding crisis.

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