

Jay Beard: Mental health system needs reform

Posted: Wednesday, February 22, 2017 4:09 pm

Dear Attorney General Steve Marshall,

During my time at the Reporter you have always been a delight to work with. While you were the Marshall County district attorney, I saw you work hard for the people of Marshall County. I saw you fight crime day in and day out, not only because it was your job, but because the stories we've all heard about and even witnessed haunt you personally. You take pride in your work. You're a man of character and you need to know that I support you and your family today and everyday forward no matter the endeavor.

With all of this said, I have something I'd like to get off my chest. The past week of my life has been hell. I can't really go into detail, but I know you can help. I know you share the same concern for this matter that I do.

Gov. Bentley has issued a plan to construct four megaprisons. His plan is to use \$800 million from a bond issue, and construct three prisons for men, and a replacement for Julia Tutwiler Prison.

The governor certainly has his reasons. The state's prison system is in dire need of help. Overcrowding is a problem. Tutwiler is in shambles. The facility is listed as one of the worst prisons in America according to Mother Jones due to allegations of sexual abuse from prison staff and a policy barring HIV positive inmates from work, education, rehab and mental health treatment programs. The U.S. Justice Department is investigating our prisons, and six Tutwiler employees have been indicted on charges of custodial sexual misconduct or custodial sexual abuse (All pled guilty, but only two served time.) I can't deny Alabama's need for quality prison reform.

My largest concern though, and it's a problem that exists in the homes of everyday Alabama citizens, is that the state's mental health services are pretty non-existent.

You know, I know, we all know, that the state's

inability to provide quality mental healthcare is one of the main reasons Alabama's prison system is having an issue with overcrowding. We know this because the law-abiding citizen doesn't even have access to quality mental healthcare. If we can't fix our prisons without repairing our mental healthcare regulations, laws and abilities, then we can't expect to fix the problems everyday Alabamians are facing with addiction combined with depression and anxiety without quality mental healthcare. In other words Mr. Marshall, we can't expect to fix Marshall County's issue with meth and heroine addiction without taking a long look at why these people feel the need to self-medicate to begin with.

I know you have hopes of being elected as AG in a couple of years, and I know in order to achieve that, you have to play politics. I know the quickest way to achieve that in the State of Alabama is to swear a fight



Jay Beard Column Mug

Jay Beard

against illegal immigrants and liberal politics ... or in your words, “Sanctuaries are places of worship, not places where laws are avoided.” That was a good line.

I urge you though to consider that Steve Marshall made it to where he is today by being the best district attorney this side of the Mason Dixon. Steve Marshall has never had to play politics. He has stood up for what is right. He has treated the citizens of Marshall County with class and dignity.

I want you to keep up the fight against sex abuse. I want you to keep up the fight against drugs. I want you to keep up the fight against illegal immigration. But with all that in mind, we have a problem that handcuffs and even rehab can't fix. We have a problem that is affecting everyday Alabamians.

I want you to fight for quality mental healthcare. We need it. I don't want four megaprisons in the state filled with people who need help well beyond handcuffs and even a laundry list of medications that usually end up doing more harm than good (citation: the state's issue with prescription medication abuse.)

I don't even know if you are the right person to talk to about this. But I do know that through no fault of your own, you have seen people put behind bars that needed more help than incarceration. I do know that you have seen people fall through the cracks because they can't get the help they need. I do know you can help.

Good luck, AG Steve Marshall. Thank you for your service to Marshall County. I know you're the man the state needs.

With much love and respect,

Jay Beard

The Sand Mountain Reporter

Jay Beard is a staff writer for The Sand Mountain Reporter. His email address is jbeard@sandmountainreporter.com.