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## Federal judge's ruling puts lawmakers on notice

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A federal judge's ruling that Alabama's psychiatric care for state inmates is "horrendously inadequate" puts state lawmakers on notice. Building new prisons to relieve overcrowding isn't the only prison reform initiative they'll have to fund.

Lawmakers have spent a lot of time the past two regular sessions discussing various plans to ease the overcrowding by building new prisons. In his State of the State address in February, former Gov. Robert Bentley outlined an \$800 million prison construction plan that would have built four new regional prisons had it been approved.

But little attention has been focused on one of the key factors contributing to those overcrowded conditions: Our prisons and our county jails have become our mental health institutions.

This began to change with the emptying of the state mental hospitals beginning in the 1960s. Widely referred to as deinstitutionalization, the idea was to move patients out of the psychiatric facilities and into more localized treatment centers. As a result, psychiatric facilities were phased out. But many of the mentally ill patients ended up in the prisons and jails.

A 2014 survey by the Treatment Advocacy Center reported that in 1971, it was estimated that five percent of Alabama's state prisoners were mentally ill. By 2007, the figure had risen to 20 percent.

The trickle-down effect is evident in county jails throughout the state. Lauderdale County Sheriff Rick Singleton recognized the growing problem when he was Florence's police chief in 1997. He designated a single officer to work as a mental health officer for the entire county.

Today, there are six officers trained to handle mental health cases. And they're needed. Of the 250 inmates typically housed in the detention center, about half of them will have some sort of mental illness history.

Compounding the problem is the reduced funding the state has earmarked for mental health agencies. In recent years, that funding has been slashed dramatically as lawmakers grappled with ongoing budget issues.

The result? The state's prisons and jails have become bloated with nonviolent people who in earlier times would have been treated in mental hospitals. Many of the mentally ill inmates don't belong in jail, but there's very few other places they can go.

It comes as little surprise that U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson ruled in favor of inmates who sued the Alabama Department of Corrections in 2014. In his ruling, Thompson noted the state had failed to identify and treat prisoners with mental illnesses, and he pointed out the prison system did not have an adequate number of mental health staff.

Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, said Thompson's ruling forces the state's hand.

"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," said Ward.

He estimated that will cost the state \$25 million to \$27 million a year – on top of the millions needed for new prisons.

It's unfortunate it took a federal court ruling to force state leaders to deal with a problem that law enforcement officials across the state have been issuing warnings about for years.

Hopefully, lawmakers will now factor into their prison discussions the need for increased funding to deal with mental health issues. More beds outside the penal system are needed for mental health patients, and more treatment options besides jail and prison sentences are needed for those suffering mental illnesses, as well as drug and alcohol abuse victims.

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