
Fixing care for mentally ill inmates could cost millions

By KIM CHANDLER / The Associated Press

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MONTGOMERY — Alabama will have to make significant and costly changes in the treatment of mentally ill prisoners now that a federal judge has found their care to be unconstitutionally cruel, a state lawmaker said Wednesday.

U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson in the Tuesday ruling ordered the state to improve conditions, something that lawyers and lawmakers said will cost the state.

“We are going to have to increase capacity and we are going to have to provide more mental health services to comply with his order,” said state Sen. Cam Ward, who has tried in vain to persuade fellow lawmakers to build new prisons. “Either you are going to spend more or you are going to release a lot of inmates.”

Ward estimated that the price tag for compliance with the judge’s order could be at least \$25 million more a year for hiring additional workers, Ward estimated.

Rep. Steve Clouse, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, said his first impression is that it is going to cost money.” Clouse said he has been in early discussions with the department, but could not put an estimate on what the changes would cost.

Thompson’s scathing 302-page decision Tuesday describes Alabama’s care of mentally ill prisoners as “horrendously inadequate,” and blames three conditions for their substandard care: “understaffing of mental-health care providers, understaffing of correctional officers, and overcrowding.”

The judge ordered the state prison system to meet with lawyers for inmates and submit a plan for immediate and long term improvements.

Asked if compliance will require additional spending on Tuesday, Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey said her office was still reviewing the decision. She said she will be meeting with legislative leaders and might call lawmakers into a special session. The judge must approve any remedy, but the governor said it's important that Alabama submit its own plan, she said.

"We need to fix it. Alabamians need to find the solution. Alabamians need to decide what we are going to do and not the federal courts if we can possibly help it," Ivey said.

To start with, the state will need to hire more trained staff, said Maria Morris, a senior supervising attorney with the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery. She expects the meetings to begin this summer.

"They will need to get more mental health specialists and more qualified mental health specialists, specifically," Morris said.

Alabama inmates sued the state Department of Corrections in 2014, saying untreated illnesses and lengthy lockdowns have led to worsening conditions, violence and suicides. The judge described a "skyrocketing suicide rate," and noted that inmate Jamie Wallace killed himself days after testifying that a prison officer once offered him a razor to kill himself.

Lisa W. Borden, an attorney with Baker Donelson, said the inmates' legal team is gratified that corrections officials "will no longer be permitted to sit on their hands, or pass the buck at the risk of people's lives."

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