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# AL state budget could hinge on CHIPs Program

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By Michael Doudna, Reporter CONNECT

MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) - State lawmakers held budget hearings ahead of the legislative session starting next Tuesday.

The group, made up of members of the House and Senate general fund committees listened to presentations by the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, Corrections, The Department of Public Health, the Department of Mental Health, and Medicaid.

Corrections was the big ask, as a court order is forcing both the DOC and lawmakers to address both correctional and healthcare staffing levels. Commissioner Jeff Dunn said the department needed \$80 million, spread over fiscal year 18 and 19 to cover the plan.

Dunn said much of the \$30 million for this year would be to carry out a healthcare contract for the rest of the year. In FY 19, the \$34 million would be needed for the contract and the remaining funds would be focused on the hiring and retention of correctional officers.

Dunn said the department may need to hire more than 1,000 correctional staff down the road as part of the lawsuit.

Medicaid asked for a total appropriation of \$757 million, less than expected. The number represents a \$56 million increase from the base appropriation last year. However last year, Medicaid received around \$100 million in BP oil spill money on top of the \$701 appropriation.

The DPH asked for more than \$50 million, however most of that money would be for the AllKids/CHIPs program. The federal government has picked up all of the cost of the program the last few years, however has yet to provide long term funding for it.

More than \$150 million in requests would normally be cause for major concern for lawmakers, but lawmakers carried over \$93 million from last year's budget to deal with budget issues like these requests. If the federal government picks up the CHIPs program (still an if), it would drastically cut down on any finical hole the state may face.

Growth money within the general fund budget may help make up any difference between the remaining ask and the \$93 million carry over.

If CHIP is not funded, the math and the session becomes much more complicated.

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