

# Legislature's budget plan must fully fund prison reform, mental health



Gov. Robert Bentley signs a criminal justice reform bill. From left are Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster; Suzanne Brown-McBride, deputy director of the Council of State Governments Justice Center; Sen. Vivian Davis Figures, D-Mobile; Rep. Mike Jones, R-Andalusia and Department of Corrections Commissioner Jefferson Dunn. *(Mike Cason/mcason@al.com)*



By **Guest opinion**

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**By Sen. Cam Ward**, an Alabaster Republican who chairs both the Senate Judiciary Committee and Alabama's Prison Reform Task Force

The biggest threat to public safety looms over our great state of Alabama like a storm cloud. Our prison system is grossly over capacity, doesn't rehabilitate those who need it

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the most, and places a burden on our parole officers and other officials who can't handle the unnecessarily high intake volume.

The good news is that the Legislature has already taken steps to address those problems, and we have the opportunity to ensure proper funding in the current special legislative session to make sure these reforms begin to take hold.

Last year, Governor Bentley appointed a task force to identify the most egregious problems in our prison system and study their underlying causes. The task force recommended immediate sentencing reform, information sharing systems, and finding a more effective means of punishment that emphasizes community protection and rehabilitation.

These findings reflect an endemic problem in our misguided incarceration policies: one that locks people up with little care, then lets them go free, completely missing the mark on providing our fellow community members with the care they actually need to get better.

Most significant is the mental health treatment many need in the community. It is a problem that impacts everyone. The safety of our communities, the cost to taxpayers of locking people up, and the well being of corrections employees are all challenged by a system that was not designed to effectively provide mental health treatment.

In an unprecedented move during the regular session that ended in June, legislators on both sides of the aisle joined together to pass significant prison reform (Senate Bill 67). The legislation's bipartisan support and its merits have earned Alabama praise from prison reform advocates all over the country.

Democrats and Republicans can't agree on much, but prison reform is definitely an area we all agree needs our focused attention.

Senate Bill 67 offers substantial and meaningful reform that will redefine our criminal justice system. Most importantly, its provisions will help to identify those who need help and set them on the right path, rather than putting them behind bars and then back on our streets as repeat offenders.

The cost savings for taxpayers are significant and the implications for a more just society are priceless.

But this clearing in the storm will become the eye of a hurricane if the Legislature doesn't act swiftly to pass a General Fund budget that fully funds prison reform and mental health services.

I reluctantly voted for the Senate budget in the August special session because I believed it was the best we could get under the circumstances. But I knew it both under-



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funded the prison reforms that SB67 called for and mental health. The latter shortfall would put enormous strain on county jails and the Department of Corrections, since experience shows that neither is properly equipped to provide inmates effective mental health services.

But the current special legislative session gives us another chance to make things right. If the elected officials of this self-proclaimed "10th Amendment state" don't solve our own problems the federal Department of Justice will swoop in and take over, at deep cost to Alabama's taxpayers.

So, let us shine as an example of model reform for the rest of the country and follow through on the promise we made when we passed SB67. It's time for legislators to stand up and accept the responsibility the people of Alabama gave us when they sent us to the Capitol. The Legislature should pass a budget that fully funds prison reform and provides adequate mental health care and treatment for those who need it most.

We have the power to create a better Alabama, and the time is now.



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Item 2. Sentencing reform.....Does this mean there will no prison time for certain crimes.

Item 3. Do we need to build a 10,000 bed prison in the a national forest in the state.

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That means you will actually have to do something about taxes, like raise some of them, and eliminate breaks on others. Get on with it.

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