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Aging inmates put strain on health care budget

The Associated Press

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BIRMINGHAM -- Alabama's elderly inmate population has nearly tripled over the past decade, continuing to put a strain on the prison health care budget and flummoxing officials who have been trying to get a hold on the problem for years.

According to a report done for the Southern Legislative Conference, Alabama has 3,588 elderly inmates, a 193 percent increase from the 1,223 elderly inmates in the state in 1997.

The total inmate population in the state increased 29 percent over the same period. The SLC defined elderly prisoners as those 50 or older for its study, which was released last week.

Ruth Naglich, associate commissioner of Health Services for the Alabama Department of Corrections, said the report's findings didn't surprise state corrections officials, who have been dealing with the issue for years.

Alabama spent about \$20 million a year on health care for prisoners in the mid-1990s, but that number rose to more than \$50 million last year. That figure does not include \$10 million spent on mental health care following the settlement of a lawsuit.

In Alabama, 75 percent of prisoners ages 42 to 55 need either outside hospital care or extra care behind bars, Naglich said.

Officials say new inmates, regardless of their age, often enter the system with serious health problems.

"Sometimes we're the first physician they've seen since they were children," Naglich told The Birmingham News in a story for Monday's editions.

Due to prisoners' lifestyles before incarceration and the stresses of prison life, the typical 50-year-old inmate has the same health problems as an average 65-year-old on the outside, the report said.

The report attributed the rise in older inmates to an aging population and strict sentencing laws that

keep criminals in prison longer and found that the number of elderly inmates in 16 Southern states increased 136 percent during the past decade.

Only Louisiana and Missouri had bigger increases than Alabama, posting 199 and 195 percent, respectively.

Because of strict sentencing laws, 40 percent of Alabama's prisoners were sentenced to 20 or more years, versus 20 percent nationally, DOC Commissioner Richard Allen said.

The state has a 300-bed prison in Hamilton that's exclusively for aged and infirm prisoners, but it can accommodate only a fraction of the state's elderly prisoners.
