



PRESS-REGISTER

Alabama prisons earn well-deserved attention

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ALABAMA'S INCLUSION in a national corrections project offers the state significant help and pays officials a well-justified compliment.

The Pew Charitable Trusts' Public Safety Performance Project chose Alabama as the first of eight states it will assist with corrections reform.

The Pew trusts and the Vera Institute of Justice will spend \$12 million over the next four years to help the selected states figure out how best to deal with people convicted of crimes.

Alabama sorely needs the help. For more than a decade, Alabama prisons have been grossly overcrowded. Part of the reason is that too many nonviolent criminals have been put in prison serving sentences that are too long.

The problem with that approach is this: Putting more nonviolent offenders in prison leaves less room to keep violent criminals locked up under long sentences.

If the project is successful and it can be it can lead to the expansion of community corrections programs such as work-

release centers, a shrinking of the too-large prison population, and less recidivism among inmates released into society.

Instead of serving long prison terms, people convicted of nonviolent property and drug crimes can best be dealt with by placing them in local halfway houses and work-release centers, where they go to jobs during the day and are confined at night. That allows them to earn money to pay restitution or fines.

Alabama already has community corrections programs in 38 of the state's 67 counties. When the project concludes in four years, programs should be in place in all counties, according to officials. That would be progress.

What's more, the aims of the national project will embrace much that Alabama officials, largely under the leadership of Gov. Bob Riley, have already done to improve state corrections. The backlog of state prisoners housed in county jails has been erased. And Corrections Commissioner Richard Allen already has plans to add inmate transitional centers and work-release centers across the state.

Additionally, the Legislature has enacted sentencing reforms recommended by the forward-looking Alabama Sentencing Commission. The commission was established in 2000, and was specifically cited by Adam Gelb, the national project's director, as one reason Alabama was chosen for the project.

The new sentencing guidelines are expected to bring shorter sentences for nonviolent inmates and more consistent punishment across the state.

Mr. Gelb also noted that Alabama was invited into the project because its leaders work together. "The thing that stood out the most is the tremendous level of cooperation across (political) parties," Mr. Gelb said at a

news conference at which Alabama's selection was announced. He said he noticed a strong "climate for change."

That's something to be proud of. Alabama officials have recognized the importance of solving the state's corrections problems, and will work together to solve them. The public can be grateful for that.

Reducing the prison population while maintaining the security of Alabama's communities won't be easy. But it surely will be easier with the help of the experts at the Vera Institute and with funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

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