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State to get help on sentencing

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The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Vera Institute of Justice, two of the nation's most venerable nonprofits, will work with Alabama officials to reform sentencing practices, the state is scheduled to announce today.

Before the state adopted new sentencing guidelines in October, its prison population was forecast to grow by 2,400 during the next five years, which would cost the state an extra \$150 million. The new guidelines, combined with recommendations for reform from Pew, would help soften that blow, said Adam Gelb, director of Pew's new Public Safety Performance Project.

"This is a brand new initiative for Pew," and it will be launched in Alabama and seven other states, he said.

Gov. Bob Riley, who was to announce the program this morning, said in a prepared statement that Pew officials picked Alabama in part because of the reform measures it already has under way.

"I'm grateful the Pew Charitable Trusts has acknowledged our progress," he said.

Pew will study the state's prison population, identify trends and provide nonpartisan research, Gelb said. Then Pew and Vera Institute analysts will help the Alabama Department of Corrections and the state Sentencing Commission identify policy options.

Among Pew's goals is to help the state better identify prisoners who should be incarcerated, and those who are suited for community corrections facilities, Gelb said.

Richard F. Allen, Alabama corrections commissioner, said the resources brought to bear by Pew will help build support for reform.

"The Alabama Department of Corrections cannot overcome decades of benign neglect in a year or two," Allen said in a prepared statement. Reform will succeed "only if we have public support and the support of our elected officials."

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