

## **10 issues to watch during 2018 Alabama legislative session**

### **Prisons**

The Department of Corrections has asked for a \$30 million supplement to this year's budget and a \$50 million increase for next year. Most of the increase would go to expanding healthcare services for prisoners, a move prompted by a federal judge's ruling that mental health care is "horrendously inadequate." Corrections Commissioner Jeff Dunn said he does not expect a prison-building proposal this year. For the last two years, lawmakers have rejected plans to issue bonds to build prisons.

### **Pay Raises**

Alabama state employees have not received a cost-of-living increase since 2009. Alabama teachers and education employees have gotten two cost-of-living raises during that span. Republican and Democratic leaders have said raises for both sets of employees should get strong consideration this year.

### **Medicaid**

Funding for the Alabama Medicaid Agency is always a key issue. Medicaid consumes more than one-third of the General Fund. Close to one million Alabamians receive some services from Medicaid. Slightly more than half are children. Lawmakers used \$105 million in BP oil spill money to prop up this year's budget and that won't be available for next year. A \$53 million carryover into next year will help offset Medicaid's need for state more money.

### **Children's health insurance**

Congress has not reauthorized funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program, known in Alabama as ALL Kids. Federal funds have fully paid for the program the last two years. If Congress does not fully fund it this year, Alabama lawmakers would have to appropriate about \$53 million in state funds to sustain the program. That could significantly affect other programs, including the requested increase for prisons and pay raises for state employees and teachers.

### **Mental health**

The Department of Mental Health provided treatment and services to almost 110,000 people last year, mostly in community-based programs rather than state hospitals. The agency is seeking to expand early intervention and treatment in schools and to expand the capacity to evaluate and treat people who are subject to court orders concerning mental competency.

### **Child care center safety**

About half of Alabama's child care centers are exempt from state licensing, inspections, minimum staff requirements and other safeguards because they are affiliated with a church. A bill to impose new requirements and help close what some advocates say is a major gap in protection for children passed the House last year but died in the Senate. Lawmakers are expected to debate similar legislation this year.

### **Juvenile justice reforms**

Minors who commit low-level offenses should face consistent interventions that steer them away from the juvenile justice system, and out-of-home detention should be for the most serious offenders, a task force created by the Legislature recommended. The 20-member panel, representing all three branches of state government, issued its report last year, saying the findings are based on programs proven to improve public safety, spend tax dollars more wisely and improve outcomes for families. Legislative leaders and Gov. Kay Ivey have indicated the recommendations will receive serious consideration.

### **Gasoline tax**

The Legislature last raised the state gasoline tax in 1992, when it added a nickel. Business groups, county governments, legislative leaders and others say the 18-cents-per-gallon tax no longer provides enough money maintain an adequate road system. A gas tax bill failed last year and probably won't come up during this election year. But that could change if Congress passes an infrastructure plan requiring a state match. President Trump has been an advocate for a major initiative on highways and other infrastructure.

### **Education**

State funding for Alabama public schools has still not returned to the levels of before the 2007-2009 recession when adjusted for inflation, although it has gradually risen. For 2019, the state Board of Education approved a request for a \$144 million increase for K-12 schools. Most of that money would go to classrooms, including to hire 197 more teachers in grades 4-6. At least two lawmakers have also proposed legislation to change the state BOE, including one bill that would make it an appointed board rather than an elected board.

### **Drug addiction**

Addiction to prescription pain killers and heroin, a national scourge, has swept Alabama with deadly force. In 2015, 736 people died of drug overdoses in Alabama, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Alabama Opioid

Overdose and Addiction Council is working recommendations to present to the Legislature. Those could include improving the use of a prescription data base and more tools for law enforcement and treatment providers.

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