

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/in-alabama-a-hard-look-at-sentencing-practices>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Earlier this month, Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb from Alabamas Supreme Court convened a conference of criminal court judges, district attorneys, and prosecutors to discuss what she calls the [hard work of fixing people and the easy work of filling prisons](#).

Alabama is the most overcrowded prison system in the country, operating at 195 percent of its design capacity. Although many serious, violent, criminals are behind bars in Alabama, more than half of all new prison admissions last year were for drug offenses. Local and national experts at the [conference](#) presented the attendees with evidence demonstrating that sentencing certain lower-risk offenders to mandatory supervision rather than prison can improve public safety. On the second day of the conference, nearly 200 participants boarded buses, received box lunches, and saw for themselves the problems facing the Alabama prison system by touring medium- and maximum-level correctional facilities. For many, it was the first time they stepped inside the places where they send thousands of individuals every year.

What they saw astonished them: 196 inmates in a bunk house monitored by a single correctional officer. Feeding schedules that require inmates to be served breakfast at 3:30 in the morning. Temperatures that soar over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer, cooled only by fans. In the judges own words, the visit was life-changing. One judge told Chief Justice Cobb that the tours had a tremendous impact on him. As a result, the week after the conference this judge changed the sentences of two incarcerated individuals to mandatory community corrections supervision.

Corrections Commissioner Richard Allen [recently told the TimesDaily](#) that if each of the state's 140 judges who hear criminal cases sentenced 10 fewer people to a maximum-security prison per year, the state would save about \$20 million. Alabamas Public Safety and Sentencing Coalition, a bipartisan group of legislators and other policy makers, is working on a legislative agenda that will hold offenders accountable, enhance public safety, and save taxpayers dollars. Legislative reforms are necessary, without a doubt. But each sentencing judge, each supervising probation officer, each prosecuting district attorney each individual affects the size and scope of the criminal justice system. For the sake of safety, efficiency, and justice, lets hope the conference in Alabama left a lasting impression and prompts these individuals to make the best decisions possible, not just easy ones.

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