

Confront prison violence

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(Photo: Gannett)

Republican state leaders in 2013 solemnly agreed that while solutions to the overcrowding crisis in Alabama's prisons could take years, the problem of prisoner abuse should and would be addressed immediately.

That hasn't happened.

Rather, mistreatment has been allowed to continue and worsen.

The latest indication of that failure comes from a federal lawsuit filed last week by the Montgomery-based Equal Justice Initiative citing the appallingly dangerous conditions and high rates of violence at the St. Clair Correctional Facility in Springville.

If even a handful of the sickening allegations are true, constitutional injunctions against cruel treatment of prisoners are clearly being violated, with grossly inadequate response from the Department of Corrections.

Among the ugly issues cited in the lawsuit:

- Six homicides at St. Clair in the past three years, including three in 2014.
- A worsening homicide rate, which has leapt from 75.6 per 100,000 prisoners in 2012 to 232.4 per 100,000 in 2014, according to the Equal Justice Initiative. The national average in state prisons is 5.4 homicides per 100,000, making St. Clair a deadly place indeed.
- A high rate of stabbings, serious assaults and fights that indicates failure of supervision.
- Allegations high-ranking officers engage in violent abuse of inmates, including one case in which a prisoner was punched and badly injured while handcuffed, requiring multiple treatments and surgeries.
- Security blunders such as broken locks on cell doors, putting inmates and officers at risk.

Given the spiking violence at St. Clair, it's no wonder the EJI blames poor leadership as a huge factor contributing to problems at the facility.

In April, EJI asked Alabama Prison Commissioner Kim Thomas to remove St. Clair Warden Carter Davenport from his position, so far to no avail.

We agree Davenport, who has a tainted history of having hit a handcuffed prisoner, should go. Problems at the top work their way down, and strong new leadership is quickly needed at the prison.

An independent investigation is needed to determine if other officials abetted the climate of violence and should also be removed. Stronger action is also warranted to curb wrongdoing at Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka, now under investigation by the Department of Justice for allowing sexual abuse of inmates and misconduct by officers.

Broader moves to end pervasive and likely illegal overcrowding in the state's prisons are slowly coming forth from the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force and Legislature, and that's commendable.

But the cauldron of violence at St. Clair and elsewhere must be addressed now, not two, five or 10 years down the road.

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