

Madoff scheme cuts funds for inmate program

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Body

Bernard Madoff will get to stay out of prison while awaiting trial on charges of operating a Ponzi scheme, but leaders at a Montgomery non-profit law firm said his alleged actions could mean more prison time for some Alabama inmates.

The Equal Justice Initiative likely will have to cut back on its work on challenging life prison sentences for young teenagers because JEHT, a foundation that provided much of its support, is closing. JEHT lost most of its funds in the Madoff investment failure.

That foundation provided about a quarter of the non-profit law firm's operating budget each year, according to officials.

Bryan Stevenson, the initiative's director, said services likely would be cut because of the investment scandal.

"The timing of this major loss of funding could not be worse," Stevenson.

"We're facing an unprecedented demand for help, our resources were already stretched thin, and we have no opportunity to recover the lost support."

Not only did Equal Justice lose its 2009 funding from the foundation, but it did not receive a payment due in December for 2008 operations. In all, JEHT was going to pay Equal Justice about \$1.5 million, money that won't be coming now.

"They have told us in no uncertain terms we won't be getting that money," Stevenson said.

Much of the money from JEHT was used in the institute's division that works with young offenders.

"Losing JEHT's support is devastating to our work, especially to our campaign on behalf of young children sentenced to die in prison," Stevenson said.

"We're going to have to re-evaluate whether this is work we can continue."

Stevenson said he was unsure what cuts might be made to the initiative's staff of about 20 people. Most of those people work for salaries far below market rates.

He said the biggest threat is to litigation of cases, which can be expensive even when attorneys are working at discount rates. The initiative's efforts to work in non-judicial ways also may be in danger, he said.

"We were working in the Black Belt with poor families," he said. "We are unsure how much of that work we can continue building."

While expressing disappointment at the lost funding, Stevenson stopped short of condemning Madoff.

"We are all responsible for a function(ing) system," he said. "You can't blame the problem on one person."

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Equal Justice has spent years trying to work itself out of business by arguing for stronger public funding of indigent defense counsel, Stevenson said.

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