

AP Interview: Alabama bringing in consulting firm to help troubled Tutwiler prison

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

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MONTGOMERY, Alabama — Gov. Robert Bentley said the state is bringing in a nationally recognized consulting group to implement reforms at a state prison thrust into the national spotlight over accusations of widespread sexual harassment and abuse.

Bentley said the state is hiring The Moss Group, a Washington, D.C., firm that specializes in helping prisons and jails prevent sexual misconduct, to help make changes at Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women

"We're going to make sure our inmates are treated humanely, and we have zero-tolerance for sexual misconduct," Bentley said in an interview.

"If there have been problems in the past, or if there are problems today, we are going to get them solved as best as we possibly can and protect the individuals that are out there," Bentley said.

The U.S. Department of Justice in January accused Alabama of violating Tutwiler inmates' constitutional rights saying the prison had a "history of unabated staff-on-prisoner sexual abuse and harassment." The report alleged that corrections officers had assaulted inmates, coerced inmates into sex, inappropriately watched inmates in the showers and bathrooms and were verbally abusive to inmates.

The governor and First Lady Dianne Bentley visited Tutwiler prison Thursday morning. Bentley said he wanted to see Tutwiler for himself, the areas that have prompted concerns, and the status of changes ordered by the state prison commissioner.

"What I saw today primarily was the overcrowding aspect and the dated, aged building that was built in 1942," Bentley said.

The nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative first raised the alarm about Tutwiler, filing the complaint with the Department of Justice.

"We think it's great that the governor is getting personally involved," said Charlotte Morrison, a senior attorney with the nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative.

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"We do think there are a lot of additional proactive steps that could be taken and have not been. We look forward to working with the governor's office on some of these interventions," Morrison said.

Morrison said The Moss Group is a nationally recognized firm.

The governor's office said The Moss Group will help with policy development, prison culture change, staffing assessments and training on internal investigations. The firm will also aid the state in complying with the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act. The governor declined to give a price tag for the contract, saying it was still being finalized.

One of the issues identified at Tutwiler is that the 1942 prison has few cameras and many unmonitored areas where officers and inmates could be alone unnoticed. Bentley said that Tutwiler should have a "good camera system" by July.

"It will eliminate those blind spots," Alabama Department of Corrections Commissioner Kim Thomas said.

Thomas said the department is trying to accelerate plans to move inmates into nearby facilities to alleviate overcrowding at Tutwiler. The department hopes to have a former sewing plant on prison grounds converted to a 60-bed intake facility for new inmates by Oct. 1, 2015. The building also will house a new infirmary.

Thomas said in early summer of 2015 the department hopes to have a former state institution for people with mental disabilities converted into a medium-security facility for inmates nearing their release date.

State officials have disagreed with the DOJ report, but have also acknowledged problems at Tutwiler.

Asked why Tutwiler got like it did, Thomas pointed to funding. He said the average national expenditure on inmate incarceration is \$60 per inmate per day, while Alabama spends a little over \$40.

"We spend the lowest amount of dollars in corrections. Obviously, we haven't built a prison since the late 1980s. Obviously, we have been forced by monetary appropriations to not have as many people as we need to. And you are working in a prison that was built in 1942," Thomas said.

Long-term Bentley said the state will have to find more money for corrections. However, the proposed General Fund budget being crafted in the Alabama Legislature does not give corrections an increase. Bentley and legislative budget chairmen have said they want to find additional funds.


"I'm of the belief we are going to have to have more money in our prison system. We've got to come up with a way of doing that," Bentley said.

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