



## PRESS RELEASE

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Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb  
Supreme Court of Alabama

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### **CHIEF JUSTICE COBB CONVENEED JUDGES FROM AROUND THE STATE FOR SENTENCING AND CORRECTIONS CONFERENCE**

**Montgomery, AL** – Today concluded a three-day sentencing and corrections policy workshop and conference with state judges, probation officers, district attorneys, criminal justice experts and judicial leaders from across the country. During the workshop, speakers discussed strategies for supervising offenders in the community, alternative sentencing for nonviolent offenders, reentry and treatment programs available in the state’s correctional facilities, and data on the state’s sentencing trends. The workshop featured remarks from a bipartisan roster of speakers including U.S. Senator Jeff Sessions. Also included was an afternoon devoted to touring state correctional facilities located near Montgomery. The tours provided judges, probation officers, and district attorneys with an opportunity to meet with the wardens of the facilities and see for themselves the overcrowded conditions to which offenders are sentenced.

“This workshop was an historic moment for Alabama,” said Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb. “It was the first time judges, probation officers and district attorneys sat down together and took an honest look at the state of our corrections system. It was also the first time many of our sitting judges stepped behind prison walls. We are all frustrated with the system. But by working together, we can create a safer Alabama. We can make the public safer and save tax dollars.”

The workshop comes as a coalition of state leaders is analyzing corrections data to explore what factors are influencing growth in Alabama’s prison population in order to develop evidence-based solutions for enhancing the safety and success of the criminal justice system. Convened by Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb, the Alabama Public Safety and Sentencing Coalition includes legislators, members of the judiciary, district attorneys, defense lawyers, the Board of Pardons and Paroles and the Sentencing Commission.

With assistance from the Vera Institute of Justice and the Public Safety Performance Project of the Pew Center on the States, the Coalition has held meetings since April and will continue working over the next several months to conduct a comprehensive review of sentencing trends and practices in order to recommend data-driven policies to the state legislature that will protect public safety, hold offenders accountable and cut corrections costs.

For years, the state has struggled with a growing prison population and corresponding costs. Alabama ranks 6<sup>th</sup> in the country in the number of adults in prison or jail, with 1 in 75 behind bars, compared to 1 in 100 nationally. The state's prison system is now operating at 190 percent of capacity. Preliminary analysis shows that a significant number of offenders that are behind bars are not there for violent offenses, but for drug and property crimes. In 2009, drug offenses accounted for more than 50 percent of new admissions to prison.

Over the last twenty years, the annual cost of corrections in Alabama has more than quadrupled – growing from \$105 million in 1988 to \$577 million in 2008. Yet for all this spending, taxpayers are not seeing a solid return in terms of public safety. In fact, recidivism rates are also on the rise.

“Research shows that there are effective corrections strategies for low-risk offenders that can result in less crime at a lower cost to taxpayers, while saving expensive prison space for violent offenders who need to be there,” said coalition member and state Representative Rod Scott (D-Jefferson County). “Through the work of this bipartisan, inter-branch effort, Alabama can alleviate prison overcrowding while protecting public safety and reducing the cost of corrections.”

The Coalition's data-driven approach has a proven track record in producing effective policies in states such as Texas and South Carolina. State Representative Jerry Madden (R-TX) spoke at the conference about how Texas just said no to a \$2 billion prison expansion and instead the legislature approved an investment in alternative sentencing and residential treatment programs. The new strategy has flat-lined the state's prison growth, achieving more than \$500 million in savings in the first two years. Texas's recidivism rate is also decreasing, with parole revocations down 25% and probation revocations down by 4%.

The Alabama sentencing workshop and conference was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and the State Justice Institute, with support from the Pew Center on the States.

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