

Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh
Press Clips
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[U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson says he'll rule on Alabama abortion clinics law by Aug. 4](#)

U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson indicated today he would issue an opinion by Monday on an Alabama law requiring abortion doctors to have hospital admitting privileges in the city where they perform abortions.

Thompson had earlier said he planned to rule by the end of July.

But on Tuesday, a federal appeals court, in a 2-1 ruling, blocked a similar in Mississippi. In an order filed today, the judge said he needed more time to study the opinions, majority and dissent, in that case.

In the Alabama case, Planned Parenthood Southeast and Reproductive Health Services sued last year, saying that the law would force three of the state's abortion clinics to close, denying some women access to abortions.

Those clinics use out-of-state doctors who could not get admitting privileges, they argued. They also argued there was no valid medical reason for the requirement, part of a law passed by the Legislature in 2013.

The requirement has not been enforced; Thompson put it on hold while the lawsuit was pending.

Supporters of the law, called the Women's Health and Safety Act, said it would help make sure women who have complications after abortions get appropriate care.

Planned Parenthood Southeast operates an abortion clinic in Birmingham and one in Mobile, and Reproductive Health Services operates one in Montgomery.

Sen. Cam Ward: Executions on hold until at least spring; state needs confidentiality law to get drugs

Alabama can't resume executions until next spring because it can't get the needed drugs, state Sen. Cam Ward told the Times-Daily newspaper in Florence.

Ward, a Republican from Alabaster who chairs the Joint Legislative Prison Committee, said the state can't get the drugs without passing legislation that keeps the names of the suppliers confidential, according to the story in the Times-Daily.

Legislation to provide that confidentiality failed during this year's legislative session. Ward said drug companies won't provide the drugs unless the state provides some immunity.

He said the companies don't want their names known to the general public. The senator said he thought any immunity would be limited. For example, last year's bill was amended to say that the companies' names would be confidential unless a judge ordered otherwise.

Alabama has 16 death row inmates who have exhausted their appeals.

State employees insurance would be unchanged in proposal

State employee health insurance premiums and co-pays would remain mostly unchanged in 2015, under a proposal approved Thursday morning by a subcommittee of the State Employees' Insurance Board.

The vote, however, was not unanimous, and the plan still needs the approval of the full board, scheduled to meet on August 20.

"I think the board will be in conflict, and I think the vote will be right down the middle," said Paige Hebson, a field supervisor for the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services who serves as a representative of active state employees.

After discounts, state employees pay \$18 a month for medical and dental coverage for individual policy holders, and \$213 a month for families. SEIB officials initially projected a deficit next year of \$27 million, due to a shrinking number of state employees and a rising number of retirees covered by the system. However, SEIB CEO William Ashmore said Thursday that estimate was conservative, while Hebson noted that medical increases projected in the past have been far lower than expected.

The board eventually settled on a projected deficit of about \$17 million. Under the plan approved by the board, premiums for all but early retirees would stay the same. Early retirees with individual plans would pay \$311 a month before discounts, an increase of \$10; families would pay \$573 a month before discounts. In both cases, the spouse of the retiree could not be on Medicare.

A \$50 surcharge for spouses who use tobacco would be added as well, but otherwise co-pays would remain unchanged.

The deficit would be covered with five percent of the money in a retiree trust fund, and about \$8 million from the \$27 million in reserves held by the board.

The vote for the plan was 2-1, with Hebson and retiree representative Robert Pickett voting for it and Acting State Finance Director Bill Newton voting against it.

"I feel an obligation to balance this thing year in and year out and not operate at a loss," Newton said during the discussion of the proposal. "We're in for the long haul. If they start operating a program with more expenditures than revenues, we've got to double down on difficult choices in future years."

A number of co-pays were raised for state employees last year, and Hebson and Pickett, citing the overestimation of medical cost increases in the past, said state employees were being asked to absorb all the price increases.

"It's obvious to me we didn't need the reserves," Hebson said. "Employees didn't get their money back. We're making up the difference."

The Legislature last year kept state agency and offices' share of health insurance at \$825 per contract, and lawmakers do not appear willing to alter that in the coming year. Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said earlier this month he believed the state employee workforce, reduced 11 percent since 2011, could be cut an additional nine percent. If that cut went into effect, revenues for the program would fall still further, due to the smaller number of active employees paying into the program.

Hebson said she was "tired of having the budget for the program balanced on the backs of state employees."

"We've overdone it the last two years," she said. "We haven't used a dime of reserves, and (state employees) have eaten it up."

Franklin County school security plan forgoes armed volunteers, at least for now

Franklin County will not put armed volunteers in its schools this fall, despite a state law that gives it the right to do so.

School, county and state officials on Thursday announced a new security plan being implemented with the start of school next week. Despite rumors, that plan does not include guns, said Franklin County Superintendent Gary Williams.

"If we ever were to train personnel to carry a weapon, it would be a mighty, mighty special person," Williams said. "It would have to be a very emotionally stable person. That person might have to shoot one of their students someday."

Williams explained Thursday that the plan instead consists of training a group of volunteers, including teachers and other staff members, to handle a bevy of situations that could arise. The training will be conducted by The Protection Institute, a South Carolina-based program that trains clients how to respond in emergency situations.

In a school setting, those situations range from protecting students from active shooters to keeping them safe during tornadoes or fires.

"The teachers will be trained to respond, to be reactive and proactive," Williams told AL.com.

"Resource officers are very important and very good. But it helps to have more than just one person able to respond to a situation."

Williams dispelled rumors that the trained staff and volunteers will be armed.

"That's not what this is about. This is just training to empower the teachers to be better equipped to provide for their students," he said.

The training, which the teachers can complete online, begins next week, Williams said. Each person being trained will have a specific training module based on their job description and where they are located in their school building.

The training will cost \$4,000 per school per year, Williams said. It is being paid for through grants from state Sen. Roger Bedford, D-Russellville, and Rep. Johnny Mack Morrow, D-Red Bay.

Morrow was the sponsor of a 2013 bill - passed over the veto of Gov. Robert Bentley - that allows Franklin County, and only Franklin County, to have armed volunteers in its schools. Morrow proposed the measure in the wake of the December 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn.

Bentley vetoed Morrow's first attempt, citing concerns that it did not require certified state training for volunteers who would be armed. The governor also vetoed a similar bill Morrow introduced later in the session, but the Legislature overrode the second veto and it became law.

Morrow, who could not be reached for comment Thursday, told AL.com earlier in the week that the training program is needed because of the rural location of some of Franklin County's schools. It could take up to 20 minutes for sheriff's deputies to reach some of them in a time of crisis, he said.

The Protection Institute is a "full-service protection, safety and security solutions company," that, according to its website, "was founded by retired and former members of military and law enforcement elite units."

Its chief executive officer, Patrick Sergott, describes himself as a retired U.S. Marine and former chief of police who "managed, directed and supervised multi-million dollar accounts for an international security operations company."

That company appears to have been the former Blackwater USA, the controversial government contractor that provided security during the Iraq War. A 2007 Chicago Tribune article names Sergott as the director of Blackwater North, a rural Illinois training center that Blackwater used to train law enforcement officers and contractors from across the United States.

The beleaguered security company is now known as Academi.

[Obamacare gives \\$54 million to community health centers for mental health, Alabama gets \\$250,000](#)

One Alabama community health center will be getting \$250,000 of the \$54 million announced today going to support 221 health centers in 47 states and Puerto Rico.

The money is to establish or expand mental health services for over 450,000 people nationwide, according to the announcement made by Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia M. Burwell.

In Alabama the \$250,000 will go to Health Services Inc. in Montgomery. Most of the 200-plus awards were for \$250,000 per clinic. No other clinic in Alabama received an award.

For a complete list of awards, go [here](#).

"These awards will further reduce the barriers that too often prevent Alabamians from getting the help they need for mental health problems," said Burwell, in the prepared statement. "Health centers in Alabama with these awards are on the front lines of better integrating mental health into primary care and improving access to care through the Affordable Care Act."

The announcement said that the Affordable Care Act expanded mental health and substance use disorder benefits for approximately 60 million Americans nationwide, including 897,390 Alabamians.

The Affordable Care Act has in effect designated community health centers its primary care safety net, promising \$11 billion to the 1,300 centers over five years.

The Obama administration announced earlier this month that there would be \$100 million under the Affordable Care Act to add more sites to the nation's 1,300 community health centers.

In June the administration announced \$300 million to add services, hire medical workers and increase availability of medical services.

The community health center program in Alabama has come under scrutiny of federal authorities as reported in May by AL.com

Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) officials confirmed to AL.com an investigation by the FBI and the HHS Inspector General of two Alabama community health centers.

The federal investigators are probing reports of fiscal and medical mismanagement at Central Alabama Comprehensive Health (CACH) in Tuskegee and Birmingham Health Care (BHC), which is one of the nation's original community health centers in this program dating back to the early 1980s.

New surveillance system at Tutwiler prison could be 'model for the country'

Once Alabama prison officials work out how to most effectively use video surveillance for security, Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women could be "a model for the country," a national consultant said Thursday.

Consultants from The Moss Group led camera management training Thursday morning at the prison, where reports have outlined allegations of sexual abuse, violence and inadequate medical care.

The criminal justice consulting firm has worked with state prison officials ever since an 18-month contract was finalized in April. Through the partnership, they aim to address the needs of female inmates and ensure that Tutwiler adheres to federal law.

Tutwiler staff members – some who have worked at the prison for just a few years, others as much as two decades – and other Alabama Department of Corrections employees attended the training, led by Moss Group founder Andie Moss and consultant Jim Dennis. Both said they have seen similar issues at facilities around the U.S.

"I've been in other systems with a lot of attention on them," Moss said. "While it's painful to go through this process with so much attention put on one institution, it gives you the opportunity to really come up as a leader."

More than 300 cameras have been installed at Tutwiler, and officials expect 24/7 camera surveillance operations to start next week.

Wendy Williams, the deputy commissioner for Women's Services, said the system already has aided in several investigations of various incidents, not just sexual misconduct.

Barrett said most inmates have responded well to the camera installation.

"It's already been valuable," he said. "The staff welcomes it, and the inmates welcome it."

The consultants emphasized that while updated technology and camera training are important, prison staff must know how to use video surveillance to maintain a balance between privacy and security.

"It's not expensive cameras – it's what you do with them," Dennis said.

A camera system is just one component of the complicated security protocol at a prison, Moss said, cautioning Alabama officials not to become overly dependent on technology. Instead, cameras should augment security at the facility.

Another vital ingredient is having knowledgeable employees to manage the surveillance system because "nothing replaces good supervision skills," Moss said.

Eight sergeant positions have been added to staff the video surveillance monitoring room, Williams said.

When camera systems are installed inside prisons, staff and inmates alike sometimes respond with doubt and defensiveness, Moss said.

"Staff says 'Are we not really trusted?' and with the inmate population it's like 'They're going to watch me in the bathroom,'" she said.

Those concerns can be alleviated by honest dialogue outlining how the system will be used, Moss said.

Determining whether a facility is sexually safe goes far beyond making sure it complies with federal laws like the Prison Rape Elimination Act, Moss said.

"I do think it's true that cameras are not the silver bullet," Moss said. "No one thing we're doing at Tutwiler or nationally to address sexual safety" will be the solution.

In early July, Alabama Department of Corrections Commissioner Kim Thomas said in a prepared statement that "significant progress" had been made at Tutwiler.

Moss Group consultants have assessed environmental health and safety practices at Tutwiler, including meal schedules and plans, laundry services, cosmetology services and fire and health inspections.

Several privacy features have been completed or are in the installation process in the bathrooms at Tutwiler. The department is still working to install privacy features in the remaining dorm bathrooms, and that process should be complete by Oct. 1, according to ADOC officials.

Warden Barrett, who has been at the prison for almost two years, has continued with other innovations and reforms "on a daily basis," Williams said.

"Inmate and staff safety remains our top priority," Thomas said in a prepared statement. "I'm grateful to the governor and the legislature for recognizing the importance of this monitoring system and appropriating the necessary funding for its implementation. I'm also pleased that the installation and initial trainings are complete so we can begin utilizing this technology at Tutwiler and use it as a blueprint for other facilities in the state."

Bentley picks McFarland as Ala rep on rail panel

A Judson College official will again serve as Alabama's representative on the Southern Rail Commission.

Gov. Robert Bentley has appointed Billy McFarland Jr. as his designee to the three-state panel. McFarland is a special assistant to the president at the Baptist-affiliated Judson women's college in Marion.

McFarland was first appointed to the commission in 2009. His late father held the same position for years.

The commission works to improve passenger rail service in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi.

Get ready to shop: Alabama sales tax holiday is this weekend, Aug. 1-3

Most students in North Alabama head back to school next week, but this weekend could be the best chance to score deals on school supplies, clothing and other items needed for the school year.

Huntsville City Schools, Madison County Schools and Madison City Schools are back in session on Tuesday.

Alabama is hosting a tax holiday weekend for the ninth year in a row, to help families save on back-to-school necessities. The holiday begins Friday, Aug. 1 at 12:01 a.m. and ends Sunday, Aug. 3 at midnight.

Many local stores are also getting in on the action, offering special sales and marking down prices in an attempt to draw shoppers on the biggest back-to-school shopping weekend of the year.

The complete list of Alabama cities and counties that participating and not participating in the sales tax holiday can be found here.

Some North Alabama areas not participating include Blountsville, Bridgeport, Courtland, Dutton, Gurley, Marshall County, Mentone, Priceville and Section.

Alabama is once again hosting a tax holiday weekend to help families save on back-to-school necessities.

Here's a complete list of tax-exempt items from the Alabama Department of Revenue.

Tax-exempt items include:

- Clothing that costs \$100 or less per article of clothing

- Computers, computer software and school computer supplies; a single purchase with a sales price of \$750 or less.

- School supplies, school art supplies and school instructional materials with a sales price of \$50 or less per item

- Books, with a sales price of \$30 or less per book.

Items ineligible for the tax break include sports equipment, protective gear, jewelry and handbags, video gaming systems and furniture