

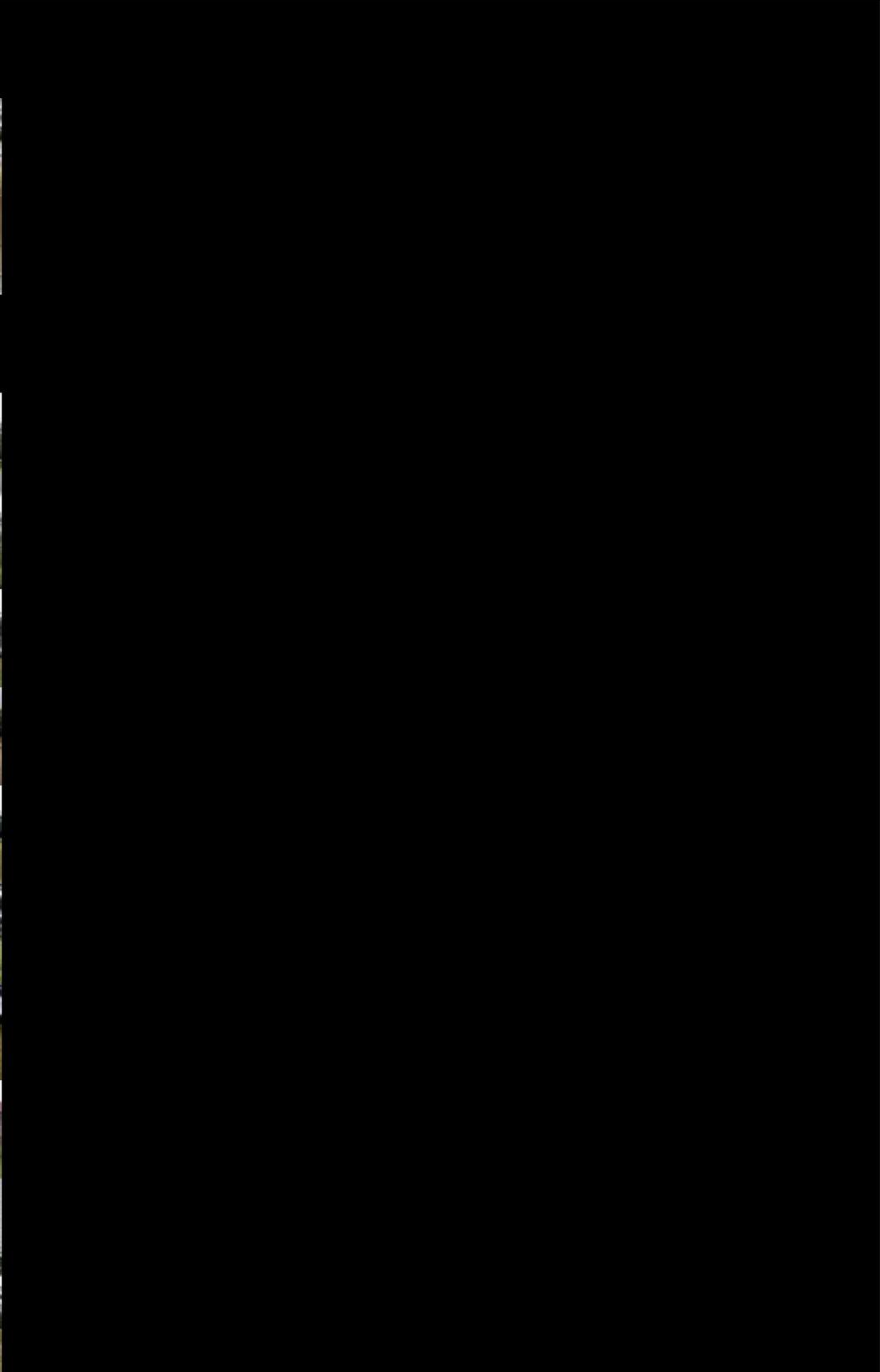


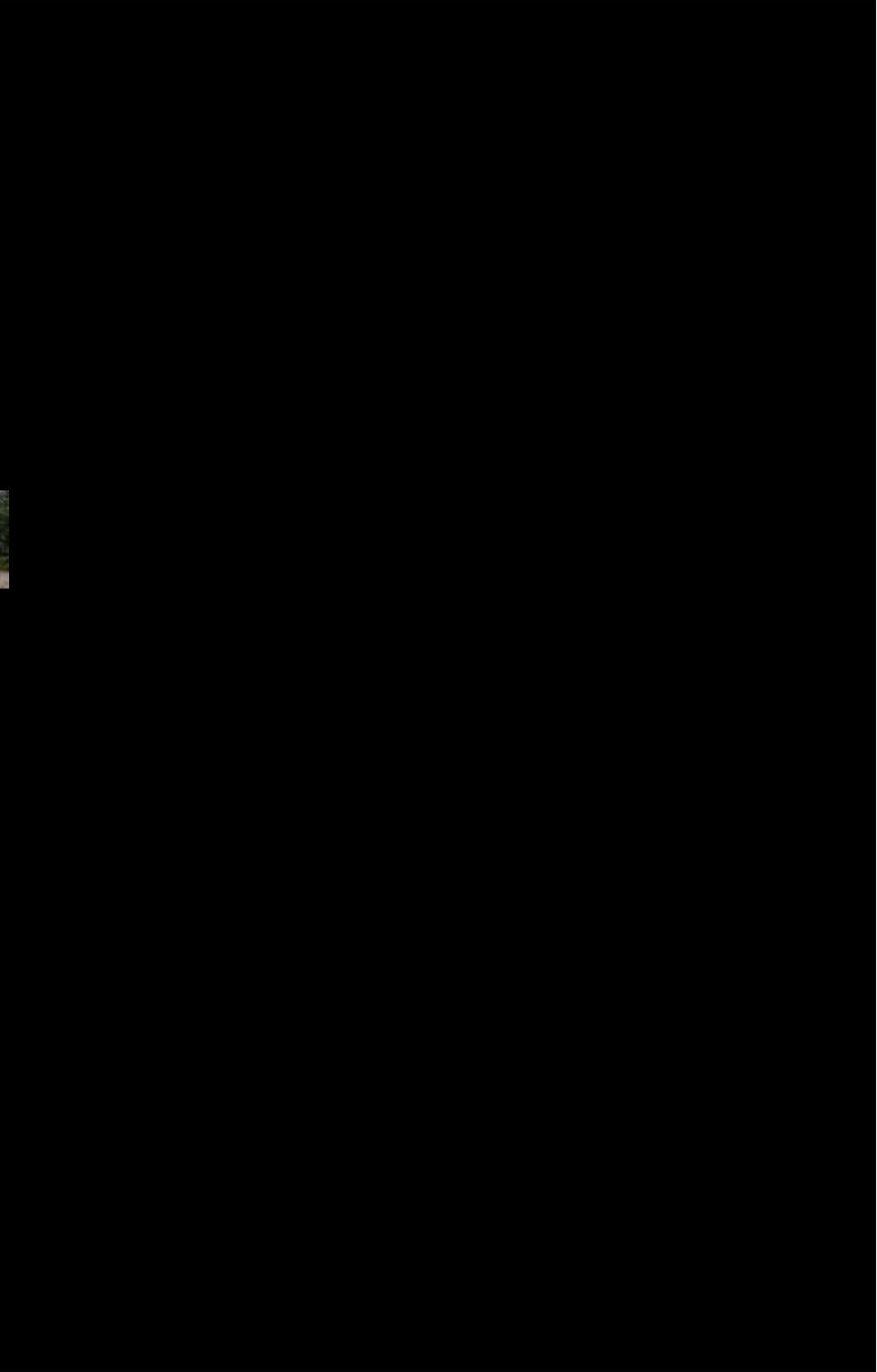
U.S. attorney looking to transform Searcy Hospital into training facility for parolees (photos)













29 / 50

The old Mount Vernon Arsenal and abandoned grounds of Searcy Hospital have been left in ruins. The site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988, but it seems to have been abandoned since the state shuttered the mental hospital in September 2012. Photo taken Thursday, Oct. 17, 2013, in Mount Vernon, Ala. (Mike Kittrell/mkittrell@al.com)

[Mike Kittrell | mkittrell@al.com](mailto:Mike.Kittrell@al.com)

on December 12, 2013 at 3:45 PM

If U.S. Attorney Kenyen R. Brown has his way, the abandoned [Searcy Hospital](#) site in Mount Vernon could be put to greater use than just growing weeds. And it could help hundreds of former convicts find gainful employment and reentry in the community.

Brown met with lawmakers representing south Alabama and other civic leaders on Thursday to present his idea for transforming the shuttered former mental facility into a place of transitional and vocational training for those recently released from prison.

Helping former inmates find housing, employment and help for medical and substance-abuse issues is a key way to curtail repeat offenders, he said.

“We can’t afford to keep putting people in jail without seeking alternative ways to address our problems,” Brown said.

The top federal prosecutor for the Mobile-based Southern District of Alabama, he said the state has the highest rate of prison overcrowding in the southeast, at almost 200 percent, and the third highest imprisonment rate. Nationwide, Alabama trails only Louisiana and Mississippi in housing inmates, Brown said.

There are currently 31,000 inmates housed in Alabama prisons designed to hold 14,000, he said, at a cost of more than \$17,000 per state inmate and around \$30,000 for federal prisoners.

“There have to be alternatives to strict incarceration,” Brown said. “Thirty percent of those who come out are rearrested and go back to prison within six months.”

Which is where Searcy comes in.

Mount Vernon Project

Searcy Hospital is currently managed by the Alabama Department of Mental Health, but could be transferred to the state Department of Pardons and Paroles should Brown's plan come to fruition. The [historic landmark](#), which sprawls across 150 acres on Coy Smith Road, was [closed in the fall of 2012](#) in a move by the state to shift treatment of mentally ill patients to community programs.

And Brown has his eye on one of Searcy's buildings, known as the Box Building.

The three-story structure could house as many as 300 former inmates, while still having space for treatment, training and other activities, he said.



[View full size](#) U.S. Attorney Kenyen Brown,

standing, presents south Alabama lawmakers and officials with the Alabama Department of Pardons and Paroles with a plan to turn the former Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon into a reentry training facility for parolees on Dec. 12, 2013. (Michael Dumas/mdumas@al.com)

It would cost about \$441,000 to get the facility ready to go, Brown said, but most of that would go toward the purchase of supplies and furniture. The building itself is in remarkably good shape requiring only “marginal renovation,” he said.

“In looking at that facility, it is already equipped for a population of lightly supervised personnel,” Brown said. It has bars on the windows and limited access and egress points, he added.

If put to his intended use, the facility would help former inmates find treatment for mental illness and drug addiction, and feature maritime-specific training opportunities, according to Brown's presentation. And based on preliminary conversations with

industry and education leaders in the area, equipment could be donated by Ingalls Shipbuilding and instructional personnel provided in part through Bishop State Community College.

Courses would center around welding, electrical and pipefitting, Brown said.

In all, the facility would offer a 30-week program, with 12 weeks dedicated to mental health and the remaining 18 to vocational training.

State Sen. Trip Pittman was encouraged by the idea of turning Searcy into a reentry training facility, especially as a symbol to those trying to get their life back on track after incarceration.

“They’ve got to have hope and they’ve got to have focus,” Pittman said. “They have to want to change their circumstance.

“And while this won’t solve all of the problems it’s an opportunity for people to realign themselves . . . so that an individual becomes more productive.”

According to Brown, the Mount Vernon Project would cost about \$3.5 million per year to operate, with a lion’s share of the funding to come from the state. Grants totaling as much as a million per year are possible, as is the chance for the parolees themselves to take on some of the cost.

LIFE Tech South

The closest facility to that which Brown is proposing is the Life Skills Involved by Freedom and Education (L.I.F.E.) Tech Transitional Center in Thomasville. LIFE Tech currently houses 350 former inmates in Clarke County, and offers its own 30-week program, partnering with Alabama Southern Community College.

Opened in 2006, it has served thousands of parolees. There is a similar facility in Columbiana, the county seat of Shelby County.

David Martini, LIFE Tech’s director, said the success of the facility relies on the attitude of those participating in its programs.

“I tell all of them, ‘effective immediately, you’re going to represent yourself,’” Martini told the lawmakers. “And after 30 weeks, guys come up to me and say ‘I never knew it was so easy to do good.’”

Those assigned to LIFE Tech are immediately tested to identify their level of education, and a majority of them attend GED classes while learning new trades and soft skills, he said.

Worth the cost?

Finding funding within the state's budget could be very difficult but Sen. Pittman said that with many legislators looking into various line items, it's possible the funding could be found. Especially if municipalities, and even Mobile County, signs on for a portion of the \$3.5 million cost.

State Sen. Vivian Figures, who has a son who's been incarcerated, said moving someone from prison to gainful employment not only provides them with hope and encouragement, it shows business partners – both current and future – that lowering the community crime rate is a priority.

"I think we should prioritize this," Figures said. "If we step out and get proactive and find this money, I think this is just a drop in the bucket for what we will get in return."

For Brown, having large industry leaders like Ingalls, Austal and, soon, Airbus is a valuable resource when looking to train new workers; be they former convicts or not.

"We have so much opportunity with the industry here that wants to hire people and is willing to invest in these reentry opportunities," Brown said. "I think the opportunity is rich and we should grasp it."