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## OUR VIEW: Another way to curb prison overcrowding

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Alabama's prisons are at 193 percent of capacity. Violent altercations inside them are increasing.

To the "lock 'em up and throw away the key" absolutists who say "we don't care, build more prisons," we say "with what?" The state prison system's budget already has been cut by \$16 million for the next fiscal year. If Alabama voters in September reject efforts to prop up the General Fund with money from natural gas royalties, it will lose another \$31 million.

We've consistently backed measures designed to reduce prison overcrowding by setting up alternative sentencing scenarios for first-time, nonviolent offenders who don't really belong behind bars. We'd much rather reserve Alabama's penitentiaries for the worst of the worst — for felons who are a threat to society and for repeat offenders who need extra convincing about changing their ways.

That's why we welcome the initiative by District Attorney Jimmie Harp and Circuit Judge Billy Ogletree to establish a mental health court pretrial diversion program in Etowah County.

The program's details will be finalized today at a meeting at CED Mental Health in Attalla, and it's expected to start sometime in August with the potential of a special, twice-monthly docket.

It's aimed at defendants who meet the criteria we mentioned — first run-in with the law, without any violence.

The applicants will be evaluated by CED Mental Health, and that information will be forwarded to the district attorney's office and then to Ogletree, who will decide who gets in. Local service agencies that focus on the mentally ill and the homeless also will be involved, as will churches.

Those chosen will have guilty pleas entered; they won't get a pass for their offenses. They will be required to attend meetings and counseling sessions, visit their doctors and take any necessary medications — steps that are intended to treat problems, reinforce positive behavior and guide them toward being contributing members of society.

The guilty pleas will be removed from the records of those who complete the program, after any outstanding restitution and court costs are paid. Those who waste this opportunity will go to jail, which is how it should be.

Alternative sentencing programs are awfully big breaks for people who are in trouble. There should be a price for not taking advantage of them.

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