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FACT SHEET

Prison reform must include Medicaid expansion

By Jim Carnes, policy director

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Alabama's prison crisis is about more than overcrowding and understaffing. It's about the generational impacts of a criminal justice system warped by racism, chronic poverty, inadequate education and poor health. The solution will require both new revenue and broad policy reform. And one essential step is to extend health coverage to uninsured Alabama adults with low incomes. Expanding Medicaid would address the prison crisis in four ways:

- Untreated mental illnesses and substance use disorders are major contributors to Alabama's over-incarceration problem, and Medicaid expansion would tackle these challenges head-on. Strengthening these services would help more people stay out of prison.
- When a person leaves prison, it's hard to get a job that offers health coverage. But to get and keep a job, you need to be healthy. Medicaid expansion would help former inmates become productive members of the workforce.
- Federal funding would cover 90% of the cost of Medicaid expansion. That would slash state costs for hospitalizing prisoners.
- A stronger education system creates economic opportunity that, in turn, reduces crime. As new federal dollars for Medicaid expansion flowed into the economy, they would generate major new state and local tax revenues for schools.

Bottom line

Alabama is one of only 14 states that have not yet accepted Medicaid expansion. The 36 states that have embraced it show how this single policy decision can strengthen the health care system, make the population healthier, reduce racial health disparities and shore up state budgets. Alabama's legacy of failure on all four counts is a major contributor to the prison crisis. And Medicaid expansion is an essential part of the solution.