

## Governors State of the State Ignores Prison Issues

On January 9, 2018 Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant gave his State of the State Address to the Mississippi legislature.

As Governor Bryant announced that he'd be asking the legislature to approve another "trooper school" in 2018 - a move that would put more state troopers in service than at any time in the agency's history - he made no mention of the 556 staff vacancies in the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC). No mention of how MDOC is hamstrung by staffing shortages; no mention of how a starting salary of \$22,689 in an industry where the national average starting salary of \$32,000 contributes to staffing shortages and lack of quality and competence among those who are hired.

As Governor Bryant lamented the "deplorable" conditions at the Department of Public Safety (DPS) headquarters and announced intent to build a new "state of the art" DPS headquarters, he made no mention of how the majority of the state's 20,873 prisoners live for years in truly deplorable conditions in state and private prisons. The state's newest prison was built in 1989; its oldest opened in 1901. The math is simple. As for the state's private prisons, lack of oversight and proper management has rendered their conditions even worse than the state prisons. But apparently none of this made the governor's priority list.

While the governor spoke, DPS Director Marshal Fisher and MDOC Commissioner Pelicia Hall sat side by side in the gallery. Governor Bryant publicly recognized Mr. Fisher, applauded his work, and spoke of his agency's needs. Governor Bryant did not even bother to mention Commissioner Hall's efforts since taking over MDOC or the needs of her agency.

As state Representative J.P. ("Jay") Hughes said in the Democrat's Response, Governor Bryant's address was more of the "same old same old".

Mississippi is fifth in the nation in incarceration, last in education and last in healthcare. There are 20,873 people in MDOC facilities and another 33,411 on probation or parole. Healthcare for prisoners is a joke. Rehabilitation does not exist unless the prisoner seeks it out on his or her own. Conditions in many facilities are not fit to live in or for guards to work in.

In 2019 Mississippi will elect a new governor. Let's hope that he or she will pay more attention to the realities within MDOC; they've been ignored long enough.