

Though Georgia has made great strides reforming its criminal justice system in recent years, the state still has the highest percentage of people under correctional control in the nation, experts said Thursday.

“The Prison Policy Group out of Massachusetts just published a report that accentuated what many of us know, that Georgia not only has the highest number of people under correctional control, we have double the amount of people compared to any other state,” said Douglas B. Ammar, executive director of the Georgia Justice Project. “... We have almost 6,000 people per 100,000 in jail, prison, probation, or parole.”

Ammar made the comments at a Justice Day at the Capitol event held Thursday in Atlanta. The meeting drew more than 250 people to the capitol building to lobby in favor of criminal justice reform. Sponsoring organizations included the Georgia Justice Project, American Civil Liberties Union, Emory Law School Barton Child Law and Policy Center, Georgia Appleseed, Georgia State Conference of the NAACP, the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, Southern Center for Human Rights.

Among those in attendance were several Columbus residents who met briefly with State Sen. Josh McKoon, as well as State Reps. Calvin Smyre, Carolyn Hugley and Debbie Buckner. The group included some members of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Waleisah Wilson, a local advocate for ex-felons trying to re-enter society, served as one of the speakers, sharing her personal experience as an ex-felon.

The gathering started at Central Presbyterian Church, across from the State Capitol building. The Rev. Raphael Gamaliel Warnock, pastor of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, described mass incarceration as the most pressing civil rights and moral issue facing this generation. He reminded the audience of the significant role Atlanta played in the Civil Rights Movement, and challenged the group to continue fighting for justice.

“We have to keep reminding our people that ‘The Land of the Free’ is the incarceration capital of the world,” he said. “... All of the regimes whose human rights we like to deplore, none of them come close — not Iran ... not North Korea, not China.

“We’re five percent of the world population, and we warehouse 25 percent of the to world’s prisoners,” he continued. “That’s a human rights catastrophe. And it’s something — whatever your faith tradition, by whatever name you call God — it ought to raise your moral ire to say, ‘No, we can’t live with this.’ ”

Warnock said his church held the first Expungement Day in the state in October, streamlining the process for ex-prisoners who wanted their records expunged. He said the effort was coordinated by the congregation’s nonprofit arm, the Martin Luther King Sr. Community Resources Collaborative.

“It’s really a miracle,” he said. “I discovered doing this work that our government agencies are not used to cooperating with one another. So we had to bring them all to church and pray over them, and suddenly the Public Defender’s Office, District Attorney’s Office, the Sheriff’s Office, the GBI and the judges were all there, cooperating with one another. And it was just amazing. Literally hundreds of people came through the door, and we were able to get dozens of records restricted that day,” he said.

Throughout the day, several people commended Gov. Nathan Deal for his criminal justice reform initiative, which has reduced the prison population and placed Georgia at the forefront of reform throughout the country. Stacey Abrams, the House minority leader, who is Democrat, was among those who praised the governor.

“Governor Nathan Deal has done something extraordinary in Georgia,” she said. “This is coming from someone on the other side of the aisle, but on the same side of the issue.”

Before walking to the Capitol building, each participant was given a packet containing a legislative summary with proposed House bills they were asked to lobby for and against. The bills the group supported were described as follows:

- HB 151 prevents correctional officials from shackling women who are incarcerated during labor and delivery.
- HB 53 raises the age for juvenile court jurisdiction from 17 to 18, which would prevent 17-year-olds from being tried as adults.

The bills they opposed were explained this way:

- HB 34 modifies certain parole and pardon procedures, which would make it more difficult for some people to be released from prison.
- HB 116 expands the list of offenses for which a young person can face charges in adult criminal court, which would make it easier for more young people to be tried outside of the juvenile court system.

After the morning session, participants walked across to the Capitol building and requested meetings with their legislators.

McKoon, a Republican, stepped out of the Senate chamber to meet with the Columbus delegation. When the group asked him about House Bills 151 and 53, he said they seemed like legislation he could support, but he'd have to do some research.

He also encouraged the group to push for legislation that would allow an ex-prisoner's criminal record to automatically be restricted after a period of time.

“How long are you punished after you have done your sentence and been a productive member of society?” he asked. “How long do we brand people that way? And so, that's something that Georgia really needs to look at.”

Later, the group met with Smyre, Hugley and Buckner on the House side of the building. The three Democrats said they would also look into the proposed bills.

“Anything we can do to lower our prison population in Georgia I favor,” Smyre said. “It's been spiraling out of control, and that has an effect on our budget. We need to continue to work toward bringing down the prison population.”

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