

Defense lawyers say sentencing task force one-sided



Tom Wilemon, twilemon@tennessean.com 11:23 a.m. CDT July 30, 2015



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The Tennessee Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers wants a special task force set up by Gov. Bill Haslam to do a better job of reaching out to stakeholders before it recommends new sentencing guidelines for felonies.

The associations issued a press release on Wednesday saying it was not aware of the task force having sought input from any organizations representing correctional

officers, prisoner advocates or former prisoners. The 27-member task force appointed by Gov. Bill Haslam is composed mostly of prosecutors, law enforcement officers and state commissioners.

"This deficiency impairs the credibility and the efficacy of any recommendations by the task force," the association said in a media release. "Absent critical input from those with expertise in the criminal justice system, any recommendations run the risk of increasing the length of sentences, incarceration rates, prison costs and recidivism."

The Governors Task Force on Sentencing and Recidivism, which has been at work for a year, has not kept any official records of its decision-making process. Nor were the meetings webcast and archived. However, the task force is considering enhanced penalties for multiple convictions of drug trafficking and other crimes, according to a report from a consulting firm assisting the task force that was obtained by The Tennessean. The task force may come out with recommendations as soon as next week.

The association sent a 19-page letter to the task force and noted that the state is already spending nearly \$1 billion on incarceration.

"Given that their last meeting is going to be next week, we thought it prudent to state our opinion and give them some information about what we thought might be the best course of action for Tennessee," said David Raybin, a member of the association. "Essentially, our letter points out that higher and longer sentences are not the best way to go in Tennessee given the budget situation. We can have smarter sentences. Tennessee ought to do what many other states and the federal government are doing -- making better choices about who goes to prison and for how long."