

# Commentary: JFK's final act worth remembering, repeating (Brian W. Davis)



By [AL.com](#)

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[HUNTSVILLE, Alabama](#) -- Fifty years ago this year in a speech to Congress, President John F. Kennedy proposed "...a national mental health program to assist in the inauguration of a wholly new emphasis and approach to care for the mentally ill... Central to a new mental health program is comprehensive community care."



giving his 1961 inaugural address. (File photo)

President John F. Kennedy

Later that year in 1963, Congress passed the Community Mental Health Act to provide federal funding for community mental health centers and research facilities devoted to research in and treatment of mental retardation. It was the last legislation President Kennedy signed into law before his assassination.

For people in Madison County with mental illness, JFK's final legislation ended the nightmare of being "warehoused" in secluded hospitals and forgotten institutions. The law opened the door to a new era of recovery and the hope of moving back into their communities. Since then organizations like The Mental Health Center of Madison County have been helping people recover from mental illness and live full lives.

As legislators today in Alabama look for ways to strengthen the nation's mental health system in the wake of Newtown and other tragedies, they should remember this landmark law passed half a century ago. The legislation set the stage for an entirely new approach to recovery in the community, one marked by continually evolving care and treatment for Americans with mental illnesses and addictions.

Sadly, even with the renewed energy in the U.S. Congress to bolster mental health services, the opposite is happening. More than \$4.3 billion has been cut from state mental health budgets nationwide since 2009, according to the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors. Funding for the Alabama Department of Mental Health decreased over \$40 million during that period, resulting in closed treatment centers, forced layoffs of skilled staff, and reduced subsidies for outpatient counseling, medications, and family support services. With more than 4,000 beds in psychiatric hospitals no longer available across the U.S., there are long delays in accessing mental health services.

With a stronger community behavioral health safety net, people in need of services will have access to care and we will see healthier communities.

To make matters worse, as mental health resources in states were being whittled down, the need for services has been skyrocketing in the last three years. Demand for community-based services spiked 56 percent.

When will legislators learn that cutting funding for mental health care will only be more costly in the long run? Withdrawing community-based supports for some of the most vulnerable people in American society typically results in tragic and costly outcomes.

People who need mental health services do not magically disappear when funding is cut. Without adequate treatment, people with mental illness end up homeless, in jail or in hospital emergency rooms, all of which will end up costing taxpayers more eventually.

Alabama legislators can do something this year to live up to the legacy of JFK's final bill. Our Congressmen and Senators can support the Excellence in Mental Health Act (S. 264), legislation that would establish national standards of care and increased accountability for mental health and addictions services provided by qualified

organizations, to be designated as Federally Qualified Behavioral Health Centers. The act would help these centers acquire the resources and skilled staff that people with mental illness and addictions deserve and need to get better.

Members of today's 113th Congress searching for ways to improve our nation's mental health services can learn from members of the 88th Congress who passed JFK's historic mental health legislation. With a stronger community behavioral health safety net, people in need of services will have access to care and we will see healthier communities.

*Brian W. Davis is the executive director of the Mental Health Center of Madison County.*