



Montgomery Mental Health Authority operates on 'bare bones budget' to treat mentally ill, low-income patients



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The Montgomery Area Mental Health Authority now operates and treats patients in the former location of Greil Psychiatric Hospital off Upper Wetumpka Road after it closed in August 2012. (Erin Edgemon/eedgemon@al.com)

[MONTGOMERY, Alabama](#) -- The average patient who seeks psychiatric treatment at the [Montgomery Area Mental Health Authority](#) only has to pay \$5 a visit.

But, most still don't pay.

Executive Director Henry Parker said the Mental Health Authority has 5,700 cases and the non-profit organization doesn't receive payment for most of the patients it treats.

"We are the safety net for this area," he said. "We turn away no one who is seriously ill regardless of their inability to pay."

Parker said the patient load grows every day.

The Mental Health Authority, which serves patients in Autauga, Elmore, Lowndes and Montgomery counties simply doesn't have the money and the resources to treat every low-income person needing mental health care.

"We have a challenge in front of us," Parker said. "We will do our best to meet that challenge."

Less than 5 percent of clients have private insurance, he said. The Mental Health Authority charges clients on a sliding scale based on their income.

And, the non-profit only has seven psychiatrists and nurse practitioners to treat all of its clients.

Since the state of Alabama closed Greil Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery last summer, the Mental Health Authority has had to open 22 crisis beds, 36 residential beds and just opened 11 more beds.

It has had to do it with less than half the money that the state used to run the hospital, Parker said.

Greil had 66 beds and also served the Opelika and Troy areas, he said.

The Mental Health Authority's 2013 operating budget is \$12 million.

"That is a bare bones budget," Parker said. "There is no fluff in it anyplace."

Parker said the Mental Health Authority had to use money out of its emergency funds to purchase the facility to open the 11 new beds because it had to have them.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health lost \$40 million in four years, dropping from a budget of \$144 million to \$140 million and that has impacted mental health care across the state, he said.

Through the Mental Health Authority's membership in the [Mid-Alabama Coalition for the Homeless](#), the organization has been able to maintain funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and keep 50 patients in apartments where they are supervised by case managers.

Parker said without these funds 50 homeless people would be on the streets.

The approximately 100-150 clients in the Mental Health Authority's residential program are classified as homeless.

Mid-Alabama Coalition for the Homeless Executive Director Molly Stone said mental illness is one of the major contributing factors to homelessness especially with those not living in shelters.

Of the 144 people counted living on the streets in Montgomery in 2012, 28 percent indicated they had a mental illness, she said. That percentage rose to 35 percent in 2013.

Stone said most of the unsheltered homeless do have access to mental health care, but they choose to live on the streets or in abandoned homes instead of a shelter.

Parker said many patients in acute care have burned their bridges and have nowhere else to go. If the Mental Health Authority can't provide them a bed somewhere, then they would be homeless.

The Mental Health Authority is faced with extra challenges since psychiatrists in private practice in the Montgomery area aren't treating the poor.

No psychiatrist, except for the River Region Psychiatric Association, which is on contract with the Mental Health Authority, will treat patients on Medicaid, Parker said. Psychiatrists also don't reduce their fees for patients without insurance.

Parker said there is a shortage of psychiatrists in the Montgomery area, and he is finding it a challenge to recruit more to the area.

To treat patients faster and more efficiently, Parker said it is essential that the Mental Health Authority implements electronic health records.

He said the transition will be costly, but it will allow patients to be treated at any of the organization's mental health facilities in the counties it serves.

"It is something you have got to have if you are going to survive," Parker said.

This story is the eighth and final in a series published periodically on Al.com focusing on the homeless and poor in Montgomery.

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