



New Bryce Hospital expected to open in December



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A sketch of the state's new \$75 million mental health hospital scheduled to open in December

The state's new psychiatric hospital is expected to open in December, replacing the old Bryce Hospital which at different times in history has been a symbol of what was right, and what was terribly wrong, in the treatment of the mentally ill.

“It’s a tremendous facility. It’s designed around patient recovery,” David Jackson, chief operating officer of the Alabama Department of Mental Health, said of the new hospital.

Frank Pitts, a national expert in psychiatric hospital design, was involved in the design of the project, Jackson said.

The new hospital, also located in Tuscaloosa like the original Bryce, will feature an area designers dubbed a “recovery mall” that includes a chapel, library and canteen and other designated areas. The idea is to allow patients to experience everyday activities in a facility that doesn't feel like a hospital, he said.

The \$75 million price tag for the facility includes a computer upgrade and move to electronic health records, Jackson said.

The state in 2010 announced plans to sell the original Bryce Hospital to the University of Alabama. The university agreed to pay the department \$72 million for Bryce and to restore and preserve the main historic Bryce building.

The construction comes as Alabama has pushed to move people from institutions to community settings. The state closed hospitals in Montgomery and Mount Vernon.

The new hospital, with 268 beds, will house approximately the same number of patients as Bryce does now.

James Tucker, associate director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, said the 268-bed size was in an “appropriate range” considering the closure of other state mental health hospitals.

Originally called the Alabama Insane Hospital, Bryce was established more than 150 years ago during a wave of asylum building. The facility was considered cutting edge in treatment as Peter Bryce, the first superintendent, abolished straitjackets and restraints and insisted on treating patients with dignity and respect, according to a Department history of the facility.

However, in 1970 Bryce was considered an inhumane dumping grounds, housing more than 5,000 patients in conditions that were compared to concentration camps.

The lawsuit Wyatt vs. Stickney, filed in 1970 on behalf of a 15-year-old Bryce patient Ricky Wyatt, led to a national landmark ruling on standards for patient care and helped established the deinstitutionalization movement.

There had been some debate in the state over what to name the new hospital and whether the Bryce name would have positive or negative connotations.

Ultimately, it was decided to continue the name Bryce Hospital for ease of transition, Jackson said.