

Sheriff Larry Amerson decries 'sorry state' of mental health policy



[\[http://connect.al.com/staff/Utnaphistim/index.html\]](http://connect.al.com/staff/Utnaphistim/index.html) By [William Thornton | wthornton@al.com](mailto:wthornton@al.com) [\[http://connect.al.com/staff/Utnaphistim/posts.html\]](http://connect.al.com/staff/Utnaphistim/posts.html)

[Email the author](mailto:billatalcom) | [Follow on Twitter \[https://twitter.com/billatalcom\]](https://twitter.com/billatalcom)

on October 28, 2015 at 3:24 PM, updated October 28, 2015 at 3:28 PM

Calhoun County Sheriff Larry Amerson says Alabama's mental health policy is resulting in people with clinical emotional disorders being sent to jail, placing them in greater jeopardy.

Amerson penned an opinion piece in today's [Anniston Star \[http://www.annistonstar.com/opinion/speak-out-the-sorry-state-of-our-mental-health-care/article_e1e140a0-7c2f-11e5-88fa-03f4ff65c463.html\]](http://www.annistonstar.com/opinion/speak-out-the-sorry-state-of-our-mental-health-care/article_e1e140a0-7c2f-11e5-88fa-03f4ff65c463.html) on the subject, which he says has created an untenable situation for law enforcement and those with mental health issues.

"We're being cut off at the ankles," Amerson said in an interview. "This is a really big deal."

The issue begins with Alabama's budget cuts in mental health services. The state operates just three remaining facilities: Bryce Hospital and Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center, along with Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility, which serves the criminally mentally ill.

Amerson said the Department of Mental Health has recent established a policy which effectively shuts down Calhoun County's Mental Health Officer Program. This program, which involves a law enforcement officer who is a licensed counselor, works with the county probate court to admit people identified as needing treatment to a designated mental health facility.

The officer position was created by a 2007 legislative bill giving the officer the authority to commit inmates or prisoners to a forced psychiatric evaluation. Lt. Jon Garlick has served in the position for almost eight years.

Amerson said the new policy, which went into effect over the summer, requires everyone admitted to a designated mental health facility to be medically stable, a definition that can sometimes vary. One patient recently was denied treatment because she required blood pressure medication and therefore wasn't considered medically stable, he said.

Also, no one can be admitted for treatment without a hearing, which effectively shuts down the duties of the mental health officer. If the potential patient is not considered stable, the case is dismissed.

"The new policy is causing people who desperately need help to not receive it," he said.

Washington's Treatment Advocacy Center says Alabama should have at least 2,400 treatment beds to serve the segment of its population with mental health issues. Amerson said there are less than 500 available.

But Garlick said as long as policy restricts the number of people who can be committed for care, then the need for more bed space doesn't seem so dire.

The Department of Mental Health did not immediately respond to calls for a comment.

Garlick said before the policy change, he worked with a local hospital or a crisis residential program to get evaluations and treatment for cases involving those with mental illness. However, a crisis program cannot perform the same services as a mental hospital, and some hospitals do not always accept such cases, for several reasons, he said.

If a person is taken to the jail, they can also refuse medication, which can allow their condition to deteriorate, particularly if they depend on medication to mitigate their illness, Amerson said.

If a person has broken the law and presents a danger to themselves or others, Garlick said, they can be arrested and receive some treatment at the jail. While there, officials can petition for involuntary commitment.

This, by default, criminalizes the mentally ill, Amerson said.

"I do not understand why the state made this change," Amerson said. "It will have a terrible effect on our ability to protect people. What can we do?"

Garlick said he and other health care providers, both in and outside Calhoun County, are trying to find "work arounds." But he worries about what could happen if someone doesn't get treatment.

"You could have a situation where someone goes home and kills (himself), or kills someone else," he said. "Then the family comes forward and says, 'we tried to get them help, but nobody would help us.'"

Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)

© 2015 Alabama Media Group. All rights reserved ([About Us](#)).

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Alabama Media Group.

Community Rules apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site. **Contact interactivity management.**

 [Ad Choices](#)