



# **Obama's Affordable Care Act means better mental health care in Alabama (Opinion from Clete Wetli)**

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Even as our obsessive-compulsive legislators exhibit some classic symptoms of mental illness by attempting to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA) 38 times, most Alabamans don't realize how the law will dramatically change their ability to access improved mental health services.

Sadly, too many people are vehemently, even insanely, opposed to "Obamacare" because they have no clue as to what that actually means and couldn't tell you three facts about it if you promised them a lifetime supply of grits and tickets to the Iron Bowl. Instead, they parrot Fox News talking points and right-wing rhetoric because it's easier to just bash Obama than to learn about how the bill actually works in real life.

This is particularly true when it comes to mental health. Nationally, 60 percent of people with mental health conditions and 90 percent of people with substance abuse disorders do not receive the care they require.

The reasons range considerably – from social stigma, to the historical separation of mental health services from traditional medical care, and to the failure of insurance companies to adequately cover mental health and substance abuse treatment.

In Alabama, the plan seems to be to just lock everyone up and throw away the key. The problem is that this self-righteous, "Old Testament-style" approach is far more expensive than funding prevention and treatment. This is why the ACA is so important to the people of Alabama.

That's why it's a little crazy for folks to oppose healthcare reform especially when they have no idea how it will significantly help them. Some folks in Alabama seem so caught up in this delusional opposition and irrational embrace of nullification that they might as well change the state motto to "Go Ahead and Try to Make Me." As they say in some anonymous meeting halls, "How's that working out for you?"

The ACA builds on the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008, which mandates that insurers who offer mental health and substance abuse treatment to cover those services the same as they would other types of medical care.

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Further, the ACA requires that mental health coverage be available to consumers as part of the law's Essential Benefits category, eliminates the barriers of pre-existing conditions, and provides for preventative screening and services. The law also provides for the training of an additional 5,000 mental health professionals and the implementation of evidence-based strategies in more than 8,000 schools to improve behavioral outcomes for students.

We need these types of services in Alabama, but instead, we continue to cut funding for mental health services, substance abuse treatment and vocational rehabilitation.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health serves more than 100,000 residents a year, but suffers perpetually from budget cuts and under-staffing.

The average case load for a vocational rehabilitation counselor at the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services is 145. The majority of counselors haven't received a significant raise in years, and Alabama underfunds the program to the point that the state loses millions annually in matching federal funds.

The waiting list for residential substance abuse treatment in Alabama is over a year in many cases. Plenty of time for abusers and addicts to do irreparable harm to themselves and society, but a situation that could easily be remedied with adequate treatment funding.

This sad and dangerous reality is exacerbated by Gov. Bentley's insistence that Alabama increase funding for prisons, while cutting funding for preventative services, mental health and substance abuse treatment and the court system.

This is a primary reason why Gov. Bentley needs to work with the federal government by expanding Medicaid for more than 300,000 Alabamans instead of stubbornly ignoring facts and rational non-partisan research. Not only is it the morally right thing to do, but it also would be a huge economic boon to the state. In case you haven't noticed the state's sluggish economic growth under Bentley, we could really use a bit of boon right now.

Under Bentley's tenure, Alabama lags behind the rest of the nation in jobs, housing and GDP growth.

Bentley seems to be making his stand by blocking the doorway to treatment, and we know how well that worked out for the last guy who used that approach.

The ACA is already having a profound positive effect as 32.1 million Americans will have access to mental health services and an additional 30.4 million will see expanded coverage due to the parity law.

For a state that has an overwhelmingly large Christian population, Alabama seems to have forsaken a New Testament approach to these issues, which clearly emphasizes compassion, forgiveness and charity. Regardless of religious view, or lack thereof, funding treatment is more cost-effective than incarceration or maintaining a feeble status quo in Alabama.

Historically, social stigma and excessive punishment seem to have triumphed over prevention, rehabilitation and earned second chances. Maybe it is time for Alabama to reconsider because this approach is costly and demonstrably ineffective.

The time has come for Gov. Bentley to quit acting irrationally and embrace the ACA. Cutting mental health and substance abuse services is just plain crazy.

*Clete Wetli is head of the Madison County Democratic Party, and volunteer community blogger for AL.com.*