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No money, no services: Care for mental-health patients shouldn't be budget casualty

by The Anniston Star Editorial Board

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When this session of the Alabama Legislature is finished, state government in Montgomery will still exist. Its effect, good or bad, on those who live here remains to be seen.

This much is clear: Dire projections about state budgets and tepid recovery from the economic downturn — along with Republicans' control of the Legislature and the governor's mansion — are shaving off sizeable portions of state services. Those who wonder what Alabama would look like if Montgomery's reach was reduced to a microscopic size may wonder no longer.

Case in point is the state's ability to assist patients who require mental-health care. Following a national trend, Alabama has closed a number of its treatment centers during the last two decades. Patient advocates argue that warehousing patients in hospital-type settings is not the most efficient way to assist them. Better methods, they feel, include smaller group homes or treatment centers that are better equipped to deliver individualized care.

Though, we'll point out, those facilities require funding, too.

Last week, state officials announced that they will close four mental-health hospitals and lay off nearly 1,000 workers in a lethal combination of cost-cutting measures and alterations to health-care procedures. Those closures will take place by the spring of 2013.

That will leave open two state mental-health hospitals. As a story in last Friday's New York Times explained, one of those hospitals will be reserved for criminal patients. The other will be for geriatric patients.

The state's other mental-health patients will have to be cared for in alternative locations.

In the traditional, hospital-setting sense, Alabama isn't moving totally out of the business of caring for mental-health patients, but it's getting closer to that point.

Earlier this month, Murray Townsend, president of The Arc of Alabama, a nonprofit that advocates on behalf of residents with intellectual and developmental disabilities, wrote an op-ed for The Star about the severity — and ramifications — of this situation.

His point: "Having the lowest-taxed state is not something to be proud of if we fail to provide essential services," Townsend wrote. "... The governor and legislators should take any action necessary to provide properly funded community programs."

Which returns us to our main point.

Gov. Robert Bentley and state legislators are obsessed with reducing the size of Alabama's government. Virtually nothing is being spared. To blame are weak budgets and a narrow political ideology. Alabama is already seeing what happens when essential services — courts and mental-health hospitals, for example — become shells of their former selves.

Townsend, the Arc of Alabama president, is right: if Alabama is going to close most of its hospitals that care for those with disabilities, it must adequately fund the group homes and treatment centers that Alabamians require. Saying there isn't enough money and ending the discussion with an uncaring shrug is neither good enough nor humane.

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