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## **Area leaders relieved to see 'yes' vote on \$437M amendment**

by Patrick McCreless and Tim Lockette

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Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health employees stood with signs along the intersection of Alabama 202 and Quintard Avenue on Tuesday, encouraging motorists to approve the latest state constitutional amendment.

Without the amendment and its promise of extra state funding, cuts to local mental health services were likely. Jobs could have been lost.

Mental health employees, at least for the short term however, need no longer worry.

“Yes, it’s a big weight off,” said Mickey Turner, executive director of Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health. “It would have been a big problem from a mental health standpoint if it had not passed.”

Alabama voters overwhelmingly approved the amendment Tuesday. Through the amendment, the state Legislature will shift about \$145 million each year for three years from the Alabama Trust Fund to the state General Fund. The extra funding will plug gaps in Alabama’s budget, preventing cuts to most state services, from Medicaid to the Department of Corrections.

“It spared our clinical services and so many of our jobs,” Turner said. “I think we can continue with the same number of jobs we have and we won’t lay anyone off.”

According to the pro-amendment group Keep Alabama Working, 170 of state mental health employees were at risk of losing their jobs if the amendment had failed.

Turner said he did not know if this amendment was just kicking the state’s revenue problems down the road to be dealt with another time. David McCormack, CEO of Regional Medical Center in Anniston, however, considers the decision a Band-Aid at best.

“It’s always going to be an issue,” McCormack said of the state’s funding problems. “This needs a long-term solution and that’s something the Legislature needs to figure out.”

However, McCormack said he was glad the amendment passed.

“It’s not just good for the hospital, it’s good for the patients and it’s good for the state,” McCormack said.

McCormack said any significant cuts to Medicaid would not have hurt the hospital in the short term. Medicaid is currently about 12 percent of RMC’s business, McCormack said.

“For hospitals, we’re self-supporting through Medicaid – the feds match us in reimbursement two-to-one,” McCormack said. “For lots of doctors and nursing homes, Medicaid is very significant though.”

Still, the impact of Medicaid cuts would have eventually trickled down to the hospital, McCormack said.

“It would have affected us because more patients not being served by other doctors would have come to us and the emergency room,” McCormack said.

State Rep. Randy Wood, R-Anniston, said it was a relief to have the budget problem solved for now.

“It’s good to go into 2013 with a balanced budget,” he said. “We can start with a clean slate.”

Wood said the state would have to find a way to trim spending over the next three years, when the money from the Trust Fund transfer runs out.

“It’s going to be tough, but I think we can manage it,” he said. “And a lot depends on whether the economy improves between now and then.”

State Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, also said he hoped economic growth can pick up the budget slack over the next three years. He acknowledged that with an aging population, the state’s Medicaid cost will continue to grow, but Dial said he believed those costs could be made manageable by cracking down on fraud and duplication in the system.

“I think this is a good day for the state,” Dial said. “It will fund the gap for the next three years, and will give us time to find a way to cut more from the budget.”

Dial said the vote was also a sign that people understand that the services the state provides are important.

Selling that importance to voters was a key challenge for amendment supporters. Keep Alabama Working, a political action committee created to promote the amendment, focused on the ground game, avoiding broadcast ads in favor of print materials designed to get the employees and clients of affected agencies to talk about the amendment.

Wood and Dial followed a similar strategy. Wood said he has spent the last few weeks selling the amendment to people who’ve called him with questions about it. Dial said he spent the past few days giving speeches at local groups such as volunteer fire departments. He said he even addressed a tea party group, despite the tea party’s skepticism about the amendment.

At most of the polling places, Tuesday didn’t look quite like an election day. There was no profusion of signs around polling places, no gaggle of campaigners waiting to talk to voters as they entered the polls.

Eddie Spigner was the only campaigner at the Carver Community Center's polling place. Armed with an umbrella to fend off the rain, he sat in a lawn chair outside the center and handed pro-amendment fliers to voters as they drove in.

"It's been pretty slow so far," Spigner said around noon Tuesday.

Spigner, who was volunteering for the Alabama New South Coalition, said his organization supported the amendment to protect medical care and children's services. He said the Alabama Trust Fund is the state's savings account, and now is the time to dip into it.

"They say this is a rainy day fund," he said. "This is our rainy day."

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