



## MY VIEW, Alan King: Stunned by Alabama mental hospitals' closings

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By

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It has been reported by mental health agencies and in mental health publications that one in four people in America are or will be affected by mental illness. These debilitating illnesses carry the diagnosis of major depression, bipolar disorder, schizo-affective disorder, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder and dementia, including Alzheimer's dementia.

Probate courts in Alabama have the responsibility of holding involuntary commitment hearings for individuals afflicted with a serious mental illness and who are a threat of harm to themselves or others.

In Jefferson County Probate Court, we conducted roughly 1,200 hearings in 2011 to assist individuals and their families. In these hearings, the range of emotions is incredible. The pain hangs in the air. For those who are not afflicted with this terrible illness, it makes one count his blessings□

daily.

Mental health involuntary commitment hearings encompass citizens from all parts of the county, rich and poor, black, white, Asian, Hispanic -- everyone. I have conducted hearings through the years involving people and their families from every municipality and community in Jefferson County. Some of the most recognizable men and women in the history of our county, community leaders and CEOs, have been afflicted with forms of mental illness, including dementia, and have come before our court.

Serious mental illness spares no race, income or educational level.

We commit roughly 450 people a year to Bryce Hospital from our court. Virtually every one of these individuals has a family that is affected by their loved one's medical condition. Probate judges across Alabama are mandated by law to hear these cases.

It is a privilege to hear adult mental health cases, but there are a finite number of local psychiatric hospital beds in Jefferson County and in the state. By law, probate judges can only maintain someone in the local hospital for as many as 30 days. For some, that is sufficient, but for many others, it is not.

Now, the state is planning to close its mental health state hospitals (Bryce, Greil, Searcy, North Alabama Regional) and lay off 948 mental health employees, according to an article in Thursday's Birmingham News.

I have talked or communicated by email with probate judges from around the state and with caring individuals with the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, several who have worked for decades on behalf of those afflicted with a mental illness, and they all find themselves astonished at the news.

It is hoped our state leaders have a plan to assist individuals and their families -- and it encompasses more than nebulous "community-based programs." That phrase sounds nice, unless, perhaps, it's *your* family member who is diagnosed with a serious mental illness.

And that's when the heartache really begins, and, unfortunately, almost never ends.

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