



Mental health plan being rethought, say governor, commissioner

Published: Wednesday, March 14, 2012, 12:42 PM Updated: Wednesday, March 14, 2012, 3:07 PM



By **Hannah Wolfson -- The Birmingham News**



Chris Pow/al.com

Construction has been halted on a replacement for Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa while the Alabama Department of Mental Health reconsiders its restructuring plan.

MONTGOMERY, Ala. -- A plan to close most of the state's mental hospitals is being reconsidered and construction has been put on hold on a new hospital in Tuscaloosa, officials announced Wednesday.

Gov. Robert Bentley and Alabama Department of Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh said at an ADMH board meeting in Montgomery that they're putting the brakes on a plan **first announced almost a month ago**. That plan would have closed Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery, North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur and Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon by Sept.

30 and eliminated almost 950 employee positions.

Now, officials are re-evaluating whether it's best to keep any of those hospitals open at least for the near future, and the September deadline has been lifted for now, although procedures for closure are still moving forward.

"At this point we have removed any deadlines or definitive timelines," ADMH spokesman Tony Thompson said.

In addition, the department has halted work on an \$81 million psychiatric hospital designed to replace the historic Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa. Under the plan, that unnamed hospital would have been the only remaining facility besides one that houses only geriatric patients, and would also have taken those patients committed to the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility. Taylor Hardin would then close sometime next year.

That plan was an answer to the state's budget crisis; Baugh said the only way to protect community mental health services was to stop pouring money into the aging hospitals and instead move most patients outside of the state institutions.

She said Wednesday that the department would have a plan for where the money would be spent on the community level by the end of the month. In Jefferson County, a committee has been formed to draft that plan for local services.

Note: Headline, story revised at 3 p.m. to clarify that hospital closures not halted.

© 2012 al.com. All rights reserved.