



## Opinion from James F. Dill: State mental health funding really is everyone's conundrum

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### Special to The Birmingham News

By

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James Dill: Mental health services are suffering

The Sept. 30 Birmingham News carried two articles that deserve the attention of all Alabamians. These articles were positioned next to one another in the Local Section -- and quite appropriately so.

One **article** dealt with the Developmental Disabilities Services waiting list of the Department of Mental Health. This waiting list has more than 3,000 people and is growing. The article featured families with loved ones who have been waiting for services for many years. This article could have equally featured the plight of thousands of Alabama citizens who are desperately in need of an array of human services that the state General Fund attempts to address through the services and programs of the Departments of Mental Health, Medicaid, Human Resources, Youth Services, Public Health, Senior Citizens, All Kids and Corrections.

The other **article** focused on the fact that Alabama governmental entities received the second lowest amount of revenues in the country at \$2,779 per person in 2010. Only Idaho received less in 2010 at \$2,769. Alabama has had the distinction of the lowest in overall tax revenues received for four out of the last six years.

There were some interesting comments from prominent state politicians in these articles. Sen. Arthur Orr, who chairs the Senate General Fund Budget Committee, praised Department of Mental Health for moving people to community services. Orr stated that the savings from closing state facilities should "help but won't solve the backlog" (of people on the waiting list). Orr went on to reflect on the fact that the state budgets are "extremely stressed."

However, with the closure of the Partlow Developmental Center, along with the Greil and Searcy state-operated mental illness hospitals over the past nine months or so, Mental Health still faces a \$12 million deficit in fiscal year 2013. It is hard to parlay a deficit into a plan for reducing the waiting list. Mental Health has experienced a decrease from the General Fund of approximately 30 percent (\$40 million) since 2008.

One mother, whose daughter has been waiting for services for 15 years, described the situation as a "conundrum with no good ending."

The governor and legislative leadership claim that Alabama citizens do not want an increase in their taxes. It is true that the state's personal income tax and high sales taxes, which include taxes on basic necessities such as food, are both regressive and generally unpopular. However, Alabama's consistent standing at the bottom of the nation in tax revenues collected, coupled with the fact that many public services in Alabama also rank among the lowest in the nation, suggest that a basic revamp of the state's tax structure is long overdue.

Whether one sees Alabama's low tax rates as a good thing seems to depend on one's circumstance in life. For those who need services such as those provided by the Department of Mental Health and other state agencies, the low tax structure doesn't seem all that good. The condition of roads and bridges, the number of state troopers on the roads, basic police and fire protection, and the quality of public schools, all impact the quality of life for everyone. Even so, all too often there is a failure to connect the revenues received by state and local governments with both the quality and quantity of such services.

Those of us challenged with serving the "least of those among us" have our work cut out for us over the next several years. The politicians and the people of the state threw us a three-year life line with the recent approval of the constitutional amendment to borrow from the Alabama Trust Fund. What happens at the end of that three year window remains to be seen. Somehow, we have to erase the disconnect reflected in these two articles. As the mother of the daughter with developmental disabilities expressed so passionately, it is indeed a "conundrum". Let's hope she isn't right about there being no good ending.

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