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Mental healthcare funding remains uncertain **(<http://www.cullmantimes.com/local/x1940317852/Mental-healthcare-funding-remains-uncertain>)**

Local official says plans in place for community-based care

By David Palmer

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CULLMAN — Mental healthcare professionals in Alabama are left wondering what will become of an already strained public service once lawmakers and the governor finish the legislative session.

Gov. Robert Bentley had proposed closing state mental healthcare hospitals by September, but a growing cries of concern have convinced the governor to delay the plan.

Bentley wants psychiatric care moved primarily to community-based facilities, an idea that may have merit to some healthcare professionals, but not without a commitment of state funding and time to implement such plans.

The problems facing mental healthcare and so many other agencies across the state is tied to revenue shortfalls in the General Fund. Compounding the problem is the governor's call for proration and the fact that the state financial officers who oversee Medicaid underestimated that particular need by \$83 million.

While the need for mental healthcare appears to be on the rise across the state and nation, funding continues to slip away.

"I think it's an easy problem in many people's minds not to deal with. It's easy to blame the person and say that person just needs to straighten up. Counseling and therapy is still suspect to a lot of people," said Chris Van Dyke, director of Mental Healthcare of Cullman.

Van Dyke said mental healthcare is often viewed similarly to child abuse; both are problems that are difficult to face and therefore don't get the attention they deserve.

"We even changed our name to include 'healthcare,' so that people would start thinking about this more for what it is, and that's healthcare," Van Dyke said.

Van Dyke also noted that the drugs and counseling used to treat patients with mental illness have vastly improved, showing extraordinary results for many people.

"We have many good medicines now, and some are injectable once a month which takes away the worry of keeping up with pills. We've seen some dramatic turnarounds for people. We've seen so many people turn around and return to their productive lives," he said.

Mental Healthcare of Cullman worked with more than 2,000 people in the area in 2011, but Van Dyke said the governor's call for 10 percent proration is going to have an impact locally and across the state.

"We're going to shut down our pre-school program for behavioral problems. We opened it about a year ago, and

while the program doesn't make money the idea was to help the schools and work on these problems before the children become fulltime students. We'll still be able to help children on an out-patient basis. We also lost one counselor, which is a position we will not be able to replace," Van Dyke said.

State Sen. Paul Bussman (R-Cullman) said part of the problem in working with the General Fund is the \$83 million calculation, which led to 10 percent proration. He said the amount of proration might have been less without the blunder in Medicaid.

Bussman also said the House version of the budget, which was supposed to come out first and moved to the Senate, has yet to make it out of committee in the House.

"It could be the middle or end of April before we see it. If we don't get something soon we will have to write our own version," Bussman said. "I agree that something needs to be in place for mental health before hospitals are closed. Will we have enough community based programs and the professional staff needed to run them? Those are questions that have to be answered."

He said the governor will be responsible for handling the application of programs, overseeing the state agencies and making sure the process works.

"I know that part of our job is to look at numbers, but we have to continue to look at people in this process," Bussman added.

Van Dyke said mental health officials are recommending to the governor that he keep one state hospital open to handle severe and longterm mental health patients. He said a letter sent to the governor is asking that proper funding be put into place for establishing the community-based approach to mental health.

He also noted that north Alabama, which is District 1 in mental healthcare, needs \$12,796,000 to establish community-based care.

In Cullman, Van Dyke said his organization is recommending the establishment of a 16-bed adult crisis stabilization center as well as a separate three-bed group home.

Further recommendations include forming an assertive community treatment team, which would include a case manager, therapist and physician, and another team that would make home visits to work with patients. He said the 16-bed facility would serve Cullman County and some of the surrounding area.

Finding locations to send psychiatric patients starts with an evaluation by professionals in Mental Healthcare of Cullman. Once a determination is made that a patient needs treatment a suitable site is found for the patient.

Finding an available room at a psychiatric hospital is a process that can sometimes take eight to 12 hours.

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