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CULLMAN — Mental healthcare is a growing concern and need among many Alabamians, but the state budget crisis and scarce understanding of the service's value is raising concerns among health professionals.

Gov. Robert Bentley is wanting to move more of the mental healthcare services to community-based facilities, which is not a particularly bad idea. The problem is that the governor was ready to shut down state hospitals that provide psychiatric care before community plans are fully in place. He has recently backed off closing the hospitals until more answers can be found for funding community-based care.

State mental health professionals are asking the governor to keep one state-sponsored hospital open in the longterm to provide a facility as one more option for communities to have in dealing with mental health issues.

What is being lost in this issue at the political level is an understanding of the tremendous difficulties families face in finding suitable or available facilities to house those who need limited or longterm hospitalization for psychiatric treatment. The truth is that most families are unable and unqualified to deal with many of the issues in mental health without the assistance of hospitals to provide intense treatment away from the home.

Alabama's pride in locking up droves of lawbreakers has been a tremendous drain of state tax dollars. Money would have been better spent through the years on release programs with supervision and guidance to steer some non-violent criminals back into mainstream society. Instead, more attention is paid to funding prisons while mental health needs fall by the wayside. Any mention of a small tax increase to salvage the quality of services that the good citizens of the state need falls on deaf ears in Montgomery.

Most Alabamians understand there is a budget crisis in the state, but much of this is to blame on poor management and completely outdated funding methods. The sorry state of the General Fund goes back to past leaders being afraid to change how the state funds services. Much of this tender-footed attitude through the years can be attributed to the state education lobby controlling Montgomery for so long.

Alabama's old practices and powerbrokers have left the state in sorry condition. There's no flexibility for salvaging the General Fund, which was one of Gov. Bentley's best recommendations early on. The state's leaders have a mess on their hands and little time to do much but stop the bleeding. In the future, steps should be taken to bring more money into the General Fund or simply do away with the two-budget system in favor of something that works for the good of all Alabamians.

Mental healthcare is just one issue in the General Fund, but a highly important matter for the state. Under the current budget structure lawmakers can do little service for the service.

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