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## Leave mental health care facilities intact

### The Cullman Times

CULLMAN — Gov. Robert Bentley has tossed about a lot of ideas since becoming governor, drawing varying amounts of praise and scorn.

The governor's knack for speaking quickly and having to backtrack is becoming too common. When he first mentioned merging Alabama's two budgets — Alabama Education Trust Fund and General Fund — into one pot, the howls of discontent were plentiful and most noticeable in his own political party. But few moves have caused more distress than when he announced plans to close mental health facilities and move care to community-based programs. That idea is apparently changing, too.

Bentley announced Friday that construction would resume on a new Bryce Hospital while plans to close others would be abandoned for now.

The governor is making the right choice to leave the mental health care facilities intact. Mental health professionals and advocates across the state have been skeptical about moving care solely to community-based programs. And why shouldn't they have doubts? Nothing was in place for such a bold move, and there was not even a financial plan in place to make the move possible.

While Bentley's plan may have merit, questioning how community care will be adequately funded is at the forefront of the discussion. Health care for the mentally ill is not a diminishing concern in Alabama. The need is real and growing.

Lawmakers have been scrambling to make sure that money is available to keep prisons running, but little to nothing is afoot for services that impact the daily lives of Alabamians.

The budget crisis in Alabama is a creation of past political practices and a sluggish economy. Many of the new lawmakers in Montgomery are admirably attempting to bring control and accountability to state spending. That's great news, but these leaders should not back away from re-examining the state's tax structure and the possible need for a tax tweak that raises much needed revenue for the faithful and law-abiding citizens of Alabama.

Based on some of the mounting problems facing society, Alabama needs to build a strong mental health care program, decrease the prison population, and put more resources into cleaning up the drug problems that fuels violence, property thefts, and broken lives.

Health care services can actually be a strong weapon in eradicating widespread drug use and the

overflowing prison population. Cleaning up wasteful spending is a great idea. Generating revenue to fund services pivotal to the state's future is equally desirable.