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## Stressful times for Alabama Department of Mental Health

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by Mark Ledbetter

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When Alabama Department of Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh announced the closing of three of Alabama's four largest psychiatric hospitals as a cost cutting measure last February the news made headlines beyond Alabama borders.

"Alabama Plans to Close Most Hospitals for Mentally Ill" headlined an article in the "New York Times" Feb

17.

"Bloomberg" featured Alabama along with South Carolina, Alaska, and Illinois as states facing significant mental health funding cuts in the Feb 22 article, "Mental-Health Cuts by U.S. States Risk Boosting Health Costs."

Some of the problems cited by "Bloomberg" and other news agencies included the possibilities of mental patient use of emergency rooms for care, patient overloads at local mental health facilities, or patients not receiving care at all.

Last fall Gov. Robert Bentley announced ADMH budget cuts of at least \$30 million. The cuts are a part of a national trend by state governments to trim \$1.8 billion dollars from mental health funding.

Baugh's plan included closing three psychiatric hospitals operated by the ADMH. Closings and layoffs of 950 employees were expected to off-set the impact of a projected \$32 million dollar deficit.

Locally, Cheaha Regional Mental Health Executive Director Cindy Atkinson said the Center receives 89 percent of its \$8.9 million dollar budget from ADMH. She said the reduction would have a significant impact on an already cash-stretched budget. "Historically mental health is under funded," Atkinson said.

Atkinson said grants have helped offset shortages. A \$269,153 grant from Green Retrofit in 2010 provided for Hillwood Group Home to become more environmentally efficient. Without the grant the improvements would have taken longer Atkinson said.

A \$178,000 ALDOT grant funded transportation for services critically needed. A RUS Telehealth Grant of \$157,560 was awarded to provide telepsychiatry services.

For grants requiring matches by CRHMC and funding assistance for technology and drug prevention activities Atkinson said she is grateful for the contributions from private citizens, businesses, civic groups such as the Rotary Club of

Talladega and ARC of North Talladega County, and the city of Sylacauga.

CRMHC serves Clay, Coosa, Randolph, and Talladega counties. “We will probably serve more than 4,000 people this year,” said Atkinson.

Atkinson said recent national economic problems have impacted the local communities CRMHC serve. “The loss of a job, the loss of houses, things resulting from the loss of employment can exacerbate existing illnesses and contribute to depression,” Atkinson said.

Karen McKinney, clinical director of Mental Health Services said a recent issue for many has been job loss. “Over half of the individuals we have seen suffer from depression related to loss of income,” McKinney said.

“Anyone feeling depressed should call,” McKinney said. “We will see what we can do.”

“We want to encourage everyone to call and ask,” Atkinson said, “Some may be spending their money on food rather than medication.”

The center addresses the needs of the intellectually challenged, and individuals facing severe mental illness and/or substance abuse. Available are outpatient clinics and specialized day and residential programs.

Talladega and Coosa counties are served by two offices, one at 1601 Old Birmingham Highway in Sylacauga, and one at 10 Bemiston Ave. in Talladega. The Clay County outpatient office is at 88217 Highway 9 in Lineville and 706 Main St. in Roanoke serves Randolph County.

Atkinson said even while facing financial challenges CRMHC is striving to improve services. One area the center is addressing is early intervention. “Early intervention is critical,” Atkinson said.

The Sylacauga center has reduced intervention time from the time a call is received to appointment time to nine days and Clay County four days McKinney said.

Thursday “walk-ins” is another program the Sylacauga Center offers. McKinney said, “Open enrollment is on Thursdays and walk-ins will have three or four Thursdays each month” to come to the Sylacauga center.

Atkinson said mental illness first aid is another service being developed. Mental illness first aid is designed to reduce harm and save lives. Prevention Specialist Richard Bonds has been trained and certified to teach the first aid course Atkinson said. “A course will be offered that discusses symptoms and offers appropriate intervention,” she said.

In September technology providing telepsychiatry services will be installed. Telepsychiatry is a convenient, private, and cost-effective method for accessing mental health providers.

While CRMHC is preparing for projected fund loss, some things have changed since Baugh announced cost-saving measures.

Bentley announced last April changes to Baugh's original plans that include continuing with construction on the new 268-bed Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa to provide acute care for individuals with mental illness.

"Acute care," Atkinson said, "is care for individuals that may be a threat to themselves or others."

Bentley's plan calls for the closing of only two hospitals – Greil and Searcy. Their closing will result in 595 layoffs.

Another recent development was the resignation of Baugh as ADMH commissioner June 30 and the appointment of Jim Reddoch to replace her July 1.

According to a Governor's Office press release, Reddoch "will continue the work of integrating mental health patients into more modern, community-based care consistent with the progress the department has made in implementing the Governor's vision for mental health in Alabama."

Mental Health and other departments affected by proration are looking to a state referendum Sept. 18. If approved by voters \$200 million will be taken out of the Alabama Trust Fund which collects royalties from sales of Alabama's gas and oil reserves.

Atkinson said that the closures of Greil and Searcy Hospitals and the passage of the referendum would not eliminate all reduced funding but smaller reduced funding would be more manageable than the projected \$32 million dollar deficit projected for the Department of Mental Health.

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