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Losing mental health

Hospital's closing could be halted by corrections deal

By Mary Sell

North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur could be closed by the end of September, costing service for 84 patients with mental disabilities and jobs for its 146 employees.

But area lawmakers hope the facility, and some of its jobs, can be saved by converting it into one for state inmates.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health announced the closure proposal Wednesday, part of a massive downsizing that would close other facilities in Montgomery and Mobile and move patients into "community-based care."

About 948 department employees would be laid off statewide and at least 473 hospital residents moved, the Associated Press reported.

In a news release, ADMH blamed the closures on state budget woes. It said that if the aging facilities weren't closed, the community programs' funding would be slashed.

"If funding for community programs is cut, many of these programs will be forced to dramatically reduce capacity or close, leaving individuals to be forced back into state institutions," the release stated.

Under Gov. Robert Bentley's proposed fiscal 2013 budget, mental health would receive \$104.7 million from the general fund. That compares to \$116 million this year and \$89 million in 2011.

A spokeswoman for Bentley said he supports ADMH Commissioner Zelia Baugh's decision to transition patients to community-based care.

The closing of North Alabama Regional could compound a shortage of psychiatric services that the community is experiencing, said Sue Brantley, Mental Health Association executive director.

Hartselle Medical Center provided geriatric psychiatric services until it closed last month, she said.

"We're just psychiatrically poor in Morgan County right now," Brantley said.

Closure of North Alabama Regional Hospital would affect as many as 21 counties and hundreds of patients committed for treatment of mental illness, Morgan County Probate Judge Greg Cain said.

"It would be a very big blow to the people who go there for treatment," Cain said. "They're short on beds throughout the state already. Only a certain number of beds are available across the state."

Cain commits patients to the hospital, and he also hears re-commitment cases of patients who go there from other counties in north Alabama.

"When a commitment is made, it is not to exceed 150 days. And if a hospital feels a patient needs to stay longer, they have to file a re-commitment petition within 30 days before the time runs out on the commitment."

Cain goes to the hospital and holds hearings on the re-commitments for patients who come from other counties, including Limestone and Lawrence.

"I don't have any numbers, but Limestone has more re-commitments than Lawrence," Cain said.

Last year, Cain committed 150 patients from Morgan County to North Alabama Regional, and he did 28 re-commitments for other counties, according to a clerk in his office.

State Rep. Terry Collins said her main concern about the closures is the loss of jobs.

"I believe our area can take care of the patients that are there," she said.



Daily photo by Gary Cosby Jr.

North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur could close its doors in September, according to an Alabama Department of Mental Health announcement.

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Athens State University
8:00 am - 5:00 pm

Bingo
Disabled American Veterans
6:30 pm

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Decatur-area lawmakers are campaigning to get Alabama Department of Corrections to take over the facility.

"(The DOC is) interested in it as a secure medical facility for inmates with chronic illness," said Tony Thompson, executive assistant to the commissioner of mental health.

"We would basically give (DOC) the facility," he said. "That creates jobs in the community as well, some of which may be current employees."

Collins said DOC Commissioner Kim Thomas will tour the facility soon.

Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, said he was disappointed when he learned last week of the plan to shutter the hospitals.

"The jobs that the hospital represents are significant," he said. "I'm very disturbed by the adverse impact it will have on the families of those that work there."

"But I also know that resources are severely stretched at this time. It is probably a precursor of what we will see across state government in coming months."

North Alabama Regional Hospital serves patients from 20 counties.

The facility has capacity for 74 patients, though it now serves 84.

Thompson said that no one who needs ADMH service will be turned away because of the closures. Community facilities and certified and monitored by mental health. And the DMH will place patients in outside facilities as the state hospitals close.

"We will be the ones that do the assessments to make sure (patients) get placed at the appropriate level of care," he said.

Patients hospitalized by court order still will be sent at DMH facilities, Thompson said.

A portion of Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa will remain open until a new DMH facility is opened there next year.

Rep. Micky Hammon did not return a call for comment Wednesday.

Morgan County Sheriff Ana Franklin said if the Decatur hospital is closed, "it would change a 30-minute drive for one of our deputies to basically being tied up all day transporting the patient to Tuscaloosa."

The Department of Corrections is considering North Alabama Regional Hospital as a prison facility for inmates with major medical needs.

"It's just an idea. It's in the very preliminary stages," DOC spokesman Brian Corbett said. "The DOC is in need of hospital space for our most sick inmates. Whether or not the medical center in Decatur turns out to be the source is yet to be determined."

Sheryl Marsh and Ronnie Thomas of The Decatur Daily contributed to this report.

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On 2/16/12 at 05:32 AM, **Peter from** wrote:
Collins campaigned on getting jobs. Terri where are the jobs?

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On 2/16/12 at 05:48 AM, **L from** wrote:
Nice to here from one of the few Dems. out there.

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On 2/16/12 at 06:28 AM, **Thomas from Decatur** wrote:
The real concern is for the mentally ill, many of whom are already out, living on the streets. Where are we headed, felons get the housing and care that was once for the mentally ill? Many come to learn that, to get care, they must commit a crime so that the Feds will force the State to provide for them.

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