

EDITORIAL

Mentally ill need state help

The death of Mister Bobby Lowe is a reminder that Alabama needs to be investing more, not less, into the treatment of the mentally ill.

After threatening neighbors and his girlfriend, Lowe — who reportedly had a history of mental illness — tried to wrestle a rifle from a Decatur police officer. The police officer shot and killed him.

This time, the tragedy was limited to the death of the man who was mentally ill. That is not always the case.

The alleged mental illness of James Holmes led him to kill 12 and wound 58 in a shooting spree in Aurora, Colo., last month. Last week, James Loughner — who also had a history of mental illness — pled guilty to killing six and wounding 13 in Arizona. In 2007, a mentally ill Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people and wounded 17 others at Virginia Tech.

In 2004, Farron Barksdale — a former mental patient — killed two Athens police officers.

These are the mentally ill who make the headlines. Most are non-violent and suffer in silence. Many with severe mental illness are dependent on state and federal programs for treatment, because it is difficult for them to keep a job.

Faced with a budget crunch, Alabama is reducing its expenditures on the mentally ill. At the direction of Gov. Robert Bentley, two psychiatric hospitals in the state are in the process of closing. The future of others is in question.

The closures will mean more people who need in-patient treatment will be on the street. Others will rely on community mental health facilities, which have the same financial burdens as the state. Others will end up at emergency rooms or in prison, facilities not equipped to deal with them.

Experts recommend that states maintain 50 public psychiatric beds per 100,000 in population. Alabama has only 23 per 100,000, and with the closures, the number is dropping.

The budgetary savings that come from reducing treatment for the mentally ill come at a tremendous cost, both to the patients and to society.

Because Lowe's illness resulted only in his own death, it soon may be forgotten. Alabama will be a better state when it recognizes its moral obligation to help relieve the internal torment of the severely mentally ill.

Even if not motivated by compassion, the state would do well to recognize the cost to society of providing inadequate treatment for the severely mentally ill.