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Counties struggle with mental health concerns

By Greg Phillips



The January police shooting of Opatrick Fitzgerald Humphrey made waves throughout the Wiregrass, but it left a particular mark on Henry County Probate Judge Jo Ann Smith.

Humphrey was described by family members as “mentally ill” at the time of the incident, in which he was shot during an altercation with Headland police officers.

In 2009, Henry County resident Fred Davis opened fire on police, killing Headland Police Officer Dexter Hammond.

Later, Sheriff Will Maddox said Davis may have stopped taking prescribed antipsychotic medication, a decision that could’ve led to the shooting.

Probate judges are tasked with the responsibility of committing mentally unstable individuals for psychiatric observation, a duty that is becoming increasingly difficult.

“In the last few years, we’ve had several people that have been killed by a mental patient or the mental patient gets killed, so I have just started slowing it down a bit and looking real close,” Smith said. “They have been up, and we have had a lot of repeats. They keep (the patients) just long enough to dry them out instead

of stabilize them and then they're back out on the street, and the next thing you know, they're right back in our office again. It is a very prominent problem in Henry County and has been on the increase for several years now."

Henry County's mental commitments have been rising for the past four years, steadily increasing from 20 in 2009 to 26 last year. So far, 16 have been committed this year.

The problem is even more obvious in Houston County, where nearly 50 more patients have been committed by Probate Judge Luke Cooley in 2012 than at the same point in 2011.

"I don't know exactly what the increase is, but it's significant in the last 10 to 20 years," said Patrick Davenport, a Dothan-area attorney who will take over as Houston County's probate judge in November.

When an individual is reported by family members or friends to be mentally unstable, law enforcement officers often have to pick them up and transport them to probate court or to the Southeast Alabama Medical Center's Behavioral Health Unit.

At that point, the patient is held at the medical center for up to seven days for observation, after which the probate judge holds a hearing to determine whether to release the patient into the care of a local mental health agency or send the patient to a state facility for longer care.

"If a doctor thinks he can hold them a little longer (than seven days) and get them stabilized, we can hold them up to 30 days in the behavioral unit before we do a final order, and usually by that time they have reached the peak and sometimes they have fooled the psychiatrist and social workers to think they're well enough to get back into society, or some of these they'll just tell us that we need to send them on to Searcy (Hospital in Mount Vernon) because they're repeats and they know exactly what's wrong," Smith said.

Many factors are likely contributing to the increase in cases handled by probate offices.

"Anytime someone goes through a significant amount of stress, it could uncover a mental illness they were predisposed to or a mental reaction to the stress," said Dr. Timothy Stone, medical director for the Alabama Department of Mental Health. "The economy is probably the main thing. People are struggling to get by. If you're knocking yourself out trying to survive, take care of your family and take care of parents who are older, you get overwhelmed. In a community where people have been dealing with a loss of homes, a loss of family members, that's a tremendous amount of stress. Post-traumatic stress disorder is real common in survivors of tornadoes and other natural disasters, and it's probably even more common than we know. You're still subject to the same emergence of mental illness other folks are in that time of stress."

Houston County Sheriff Andy Hughes has seen the increase firsthand.

"We've actually picked up 61 people so far this year on mental pickup orders from probate court, that's averaging 10 a month," Hughes said. "We're responsible as an arm of the court, even probate court, to physically pick these patients up and transport them to mental facilities so they can be committed and treated.

"We definitely have to pick more of them up. It's one of those things that taxes our manpower. A majority of (patients) do not give us any problems whatsoever, but we make sure deputies have gone through training on handling mentally ill people. Some of them, we have to physically fight with them to take them into custody to take them to a mental facility."

According to some experts, funding is the primary concern right now for mental health care.

The state fronts the bill for commitments.

Henry County's alone cost the state \$36,000 last year.

Gov. Robert Bentley recently announced plans to eventually close two of the state-run mental hospitals: Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery and Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon, where several Wiregrass mental patients have been sent in the past.

"I am concerned because there is such a lack of funding at the state level to provide the resources that we need to address the mentally ill in our community," Davenport said. "That impact affects every aspect of the community, from the sheriff's department and their interaction with the mentally ill to the court, even from the criminal side, the impact on the circuit and district courts because of criminal charges brought against the mentally ill when they are in an incapacitated state. It's a real problem."

Stone said there's been a shift in recent years from focusing on inpatient care to focusing on outpatient care, but even financial support for that is thinning.

"One of these outside factors beyond just stress is services that people receive," Stone said. "If there is a lack of services in the spectrum of care for people with mental illness, you can see changes in the number of commitments, the number of people hospitalized. (If an) agency cuts back or goes away, then there's a greater likelihood folks are not going to do as well, there'll be a higher incidence of people who get sick and are hospitalized, particularly with folks who wind up in probate court. Those individuals typically have serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia that cause severe physical impediments and put them at risk of harming themselves or others. When mental health services are cut back, those folks are the canary in the coal mine."

Instead of focusing on keeping patients long-term, the focus has turned to putting the patients into the community as quickly as possible with the help of agencies such as SpectraCare.

"In our situation, we've actually gone through a period of relative improvement," Stone said. "We started in just like every other state with large state hospitals. It was a revolving door where people would come in and go right back to the hospital. Over the years, we have seen where funding for outpatient services has surpassed that for inpatient services in our state. Not only do we want keep from losing the progress we've made, it makes more sense to keep people in the community. It's a healthier place for them to be. Many people live there successfully. When you pull money out of the community, it has a much bigger impact than pulling from facilities. Now, since we're experiencing cuts across the board, it's difficult to say what happens. I'm very concerned."

SpectraCare says the problem isn't any worse for it than normal.

"We're pretty much status quo, no more going in than coming out, and it's actually better for us this year than last year," said Melissa Kirkland, executive director of SpectraCare, which serves Barbour, Dale, Henry, Houston and Geneva counties. "We've taken more out of the state hospitals than are being committed to the state hospitals because the hospitals are gradually shrinking. In the last two years especially, SpectraCare has been part of a downsizing project. We've put more services in the community, but also we have enhanced some of the services we have. We've got more available so they can recover quickly."

But that course of action, according to some local officials, has created more problems.

"Recently, we've seen the state cut back on their funding with the intention of closing state hospitals, thereby reducing resources the local community has to find help," Davenport said. "It puts the burden on the local community to meet the needs of the mentally ill. We're seeing more mentally ill in our community because there are few state resources to provide treatment on a long-term basis for the mentally ill.

"Consequently, oftentimes before they're ready to be returned to the community, they're back in the community. The Alabama Supreme Court in the early '70s set the ground work for being less restrictive on

an individual's rights in terms of forcing them to get treatment. There's good and bad to that. The good is we don't unnecessarily have people institutionalized. The unfortunate side is some of the people we have living homeless and under bridges are people who may have been institutionalized in the past."

Smith said the state's movement away from inpatient facilities concerns her as well.

"Even when you send them to Searcy, they don't keep them there long," she said. "So you put them back into society. One of the things the state mental health department wants to do is to be able put that individual back in their community with familiar surroundings of people as quickly as possible. That's all good, nobody wants to hold somebody locked in a facility if they're able to function on their own or with someone's help. But a lot of these people are vulnerable.

"People can get to them, take advantage of them, all kinds of stuff. It's a constant cycle. You send them to the hospital, they stay 30 to 60 days, they send them home, and then they're back out showing themselves again. We'll get a call saying this individual is doing such and such."

Kirkland said patients who have repeated visits to probate court primarily do so because they stop taking their prescribed medication.

Yet even through the disagreements, experts agree mental health care will continue to be a problematic issue for the state.

"I think it is more important than ever that people educate themselves about mental illness," Stone said. "Take the opportunity to learn what mental illness is, how it manifests itself. Through that we can dispel some of the stigmas associated with it. Some of the struggles we've had getting folks placed in the community go with the stigma and lack of knowledge people have about mental illness. People say, 'Not in my backyard.' The majority of people with mental illness are not violent, don't harm people and just want to live their lives. They're just like you or I. Yes, we've got to provide these services that take care of folks that are dangerous and may need to be hospitalized for a while, but we also have to acknowledge that we've got to take care of the folks who can make it, and we've got to fund it."

Mental commitments in Houston County

January 2011: 19

January 2012: 27

February 2011: 7

February 2012: 29

March 2011: 12

March 2012: 18

April 2011: 15

April 2012: 20

May 2011: 20

May 2012: 25

