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Patients urge legislators not to cut mental health

By BOB JOHNSON

Associated Press

Published: Wednesday, February 22, 2012 at 6:42 p.m.

More than 300 people rallied outside of the Alabama Statehouse on Wednesday, asking lawmakers not to cut funding to mental health services.

Many of those at the rally were wearing distinctive red shirts and receive services for alcoholism, mental illnesses or intellectual disabilities from the Department of Mental Health.

The rally took place shortly before House and Senate budget committees heard Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh say that a proposed 25 percent budget cut could cause thousands to lose community mental health services. Baugh said she has proposed closing four existing mental health facilities in Tuscaloosa, Decatur, Montgomery and Washington County as a way to keep from eliminating those community services.

At the rally, speakers told stories of holding down jobs and living normal lives despite mental disabilities. They said that was thanks to community-based mental health programs.

Joe Farley of Demopolis said he had grown up in foster homes and has had a history of substance abuse and other problems. He said mental health community programs have helped him get a job and he has met his idol, Alabama football coach Nick Saban.

"Mental health services have helped save my life. Please don't cut mental health funding. Our lives depend on it," Farley said.

For Glenn Childs, 50, of Anniston, mental health services helped him get his job with Action Industries, where he has helped with various tasks, including repackaging ammunition.

"I feel comfortable with it," said Childs of his first fulltime job. Childs, who suffers from intellectual disabilities, lives with his parents.

Baugh spoke briefly at the rally, saying she was "humbled" by the support from those who have received mental health services.

She said the idea of cutting the department 25 percent "is not acceptable to me."

"There's no more bone or bone marrow to cut," Baugh said.

Then she went inside the Statehouse to a budget hearing where she asked that her budget from the General Fund be raised from about 116 million to about 139 million. State officials have said the General Fund faces a critical shortfall and that agencies may have to be cut as much as 25 percent.

She told legislators the 25 percent cut would be devastating and could lead to a federal takeover of mental health services and could cause the loss of thousands of private sector jobs in companies that do business with the department.



But Baugh said by closing the hospitals and transferring those services to community programs, the department would save enough money to preserve community programs and to lessen the effects of the budget cuts.

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The chairman of the House committee that writes the General Fund budget, Rep. Jim Barton of Mobile, could offer Baugh little solace.

"I would love to fully fund your department, but the dollars aren't there," Barton said

Some legislators oppose the plan to close the existing hospitals, particularly those who represent areas where the facilities are located.