

## Bryce decision took many by surprise

By [Dana Beyerle](#)

Times Montgomery Bureau

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MONTGOMERY — The decision by Gov. Robert Bentley's mental health commissioner to transform the new mental illness hospital under construction near the University of Alabama and a tornado-ravaged low-income neighborhood into a facility for the criminally insane caught many by surprise.

Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh, facing potentially catastrophic budget cuts, on Feb. 15 outlined a cost-saving plan to close four of six mental illness facilities statewide and provide mental illness services in communities.

Baugh's plan includes shifting current and future court-committed patients in the Taylor Hardin Secure Mental Facility in Tuscaloosa to the replacement Bryce Hospital being built on University Boulevard across McFarland Boulevard, near the University of Alabama campus.

Her bottom line was she decided to close facilities given the trend to and lesser expense of community treatment, the exorbitant cost of institutionalized treatment operations, the fact that the replacement hospital is under construction and the reality that state budget appropriations won't be enough to operate facilities and community treatment for thousands of patients.

Community treatment is eligible for federal Medicaid dollars, while institutions are operated at state expense.

Baugh's plan depends on the ability to close four psychiatric facilities, including Taylor Hardin, and transfer patients to community settings. She had planned a closing date of Sept. 30, but she and Gov. Robert Bentley agreed that patients are more important than a hard closure date.

"Patient welfare is the most important thing to him (Bentley) regarding these closings, and he wants to make sure they are taken care of and have the proper support structure in place before being moved into the community," Bentley spokeswoman Jennifer Ardis said Friday.

Baugh's plan stunned lawmakers who heard her plan firsthand. "I'm shocked and disappointed," said Rep. Alan Harper, R-Aliceville, who represents part of Tuscaloosa County.

Closing mental health facilities and shifting services to the communities has been

going on for at least 15 years.

But changing the use of the “new” Bryce Hospital from a mental illness hospital for adults into a secure medical facility on a main entrance to the university is a separate and sensitive issue.

Besides being built on University Boulevard on the property of the now-closed W.D. Partlow Developmental Center, just east of the campus, the replacement hospital's visible footprint is a stone's throw from Alberta City, a low-income predominantly black neighborhood devastated by the April 27 tornado.

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