

The Gadsden Times

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Network of disability groups rallies to protect state funding for services

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MONTGOMERY — An umbrella organization of disability groups on Thursday rallied to urge legislators to protect funding that provides services for the disabled.

"We fear cuts in service for people with disabilities, deaf services, the blind, pretty much across the board," said Chris Tidwell of Tuscaloosa, vice president of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Network that hosted the rally.

Tidwell said the 2012-13 state General Fund budget will include cuts for disability services. "We're expecting cuts of 25 percent across the board," she said.

About 225 people rallied at the State House and later met with legislators who will have to approve a General Fund budget for the new fiscal year that begins Oct. 1. The budget will contain funding for the Department of Mental Health.

"The budgets are a very difficult process," said Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, chairman of the Senate Finance and Taxation General Fund Committee.

Lisa Daniel is a Gadsden native and a former DeKalb County teacher. "Today's rally is a plea to keep funding for mental health facilities and individuals with disabilities," she said.

Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh spoke about her plans to deliver more mental health services in communities as the department begins to close four of six state mental illness hospitals.

Baugh said her closure plans were necessitated by the lack of funds to operate facilities.

She said it's possible the Legislature could cut Department of Mental Health funding by up to 25 percent. She said her plan to deliver mental health services in communities rather than in institutions could lessen the impact of the cuts.

"As we continue to weather fiscal challenges of 2012 and '13, we have many opportunities to increase services," Baugh said. "It is a continuation of what we have been doing."

The Department of Mental Health has been closing state institutions and providing community-based services since the mid-1990s. Baugh closed the last facility for intellectual disabilities last year and shifted her sights on closing four of six mental illness hospitals.

Her plan to close those hospitals and deliver service in communities would leave only the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Center and the replacement for Bryce Hospital remaining in Tuscaloosa.

The new hospital being built near the University of Alabama campus will be converted into a forensics hospital for court-committed patients, replacing the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility. Taylor Hardin eventually will be closed, Baugh said.



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The Department of Mental Health and the University of Alabama are partners in constructing the new hospital. Baugh's plans for the hospital have been questioned by Mayor Walt Maddox, some legislators and Tuscaloosa County Circuit Judge John England Jr., a University of Alabama System board of trustees member.

Baugh said she met on Wednesday with new University of Alabama System Chancellor Robert Witt.

"We discussed our plans," she said. "He was glad we were there to explain our plan and is looking forward to a very productive relationship."

Witt is the former University of Alabama president who last week was named chancellor to succeed the retiring Malcolm Portera.

University spokeswomen Deborah Lane and Cathy Andreen didn't respond to requests made Wednesday and Thursday for information about Witt's meeting.

After Baugh spoke at the rally, ALDAN's Tidwell called for solidarity in urging legislators to protect mental health funding.

"We have been a steady voice for advocacy if we act together," Tidwell said. "Together we can accomplish much. Together is where we stand united."