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Governor reassesses mental health plans

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MONTGOMERY — Gov. Robert Bentley on Wednesday said his decision to suspend construction on a replacement for Bryce Hospital will affect implementation of initial plans for community treatment of patients currently in Alabama's mental hospitals.

Bentley told the Department of Mental Health's advisory board that plans and a timetable to shift patients in existing Alabama mental hospitals to community treatment are being reassessed, but will continue.

His office said a Wednesday web story that said mental health plans were on hold was incorrect.

Bentley said a key part of the plan — replacing Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa — might not continue.

Construction of the replacement psychiatric hospital already had begun when Bentley halted it two weeks ago. The governor said he would reassess the need for the new \$73 million hospital, given the department's plan to restructure the delivery of mental health services partly due to financial constraints.

“We wanted to stop the construction right now so that we can make a decision if we want to put all that money in brick or mortar, or put all that money into really creating a first-class outpatient system across the state,” Bentley said.

Plans include closing four of six mental illness facilities and transferring court-committed criminal defendants into the replacement Bryce Hospital that has a current construction cost of \$73 million.

A new Bryce Hospital is part of an overall plan that includes operating the new facility as a forensic hospital for court-committed criminal defendants beginning in 2013.

“We're not making any permanent decisions right until we look how everything would fit together,” Bentley said after the board meeting. “It was stopped simply because we don't want to spend money if we decide that is not the route we need.”

The current Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility for court-committed criminal defendants eventually would be closed, but Bentley said that also is on hold. “Our plans are we have no changes to Taylor Hardin,” he said.

Bentley told board members that he still wants to deinstitutionalize patient care.

“If we can develop the infrastructure on an outpatient basis, and it's going to take time, we talk about (certain dates) and maybe we shouldn't talk about a (certain date) to do some things we do,” he said.

That would include “as expeditiously as possible,” as he put it, building an infrastructure across the state to ensure patients are taken care of.

Those plans include 16-bed regional homes and crisis centers possibly in hospitals.

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