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### OUR VIEW: Reassessing mental health changes

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All the recent stories about planned or potential changes to Alabama's mental health system probably have left those who don't know the intricacies of the issue in a state of complete confusion.

That's why we think Gov. Robert Bentley did the right thing this week by saying "slow down," at least for the moment.

Bentley made clear that he isn't going to stop plans to shift patients now in the state's mental hospitals to community treatment.

Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh has cited financial reasons for that move — Alabama would be in position to get considerably more federal funding, plus the closing of four of its six mental hospitals as proposed could produce as much as \$30 million in annual savings.

However, moving mentally ill patients out of institutions into community settings, where they can live and function around family and in familiar surroundings as they undergo treatment, has been the trend in mental health care for years. Even institutions that provide vital services and do good work have the stigma of being merely warehouses for people with mental problems.

Alabama needs to keep pursuing that goal, but that's what it is right now, a goal. As we've noted before, this community treatment plan doesn't need to go live until a foundation is in place that will allow it to immediately and properly serve patients.

An original deadline of Sept. 30 for closing the four hospitals already has been tossed out, and while there's some urgency involved — the Department of Mental Health, like other state agencies, is facing the budget axe — patients' interests have to be the primary consideration.

That's why we also welcome Bentley's plan to reassess whether construction of a new mental hospital in Tuscaloosa should continue.

That hospital would replace Bryce Hospital and house court-committed criminal defendants, who would be moved from the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa, which would be closed.

Bentley already had stopped construction on the \$73 million project, and this week said he needed to weigh whether that money would be better used on developing a community treatment infrastructure.

It's a simple question. What does Alabama need more: a facility to do something another facility that opened just 30 years ago already is doing, or a system to provide essential services to some of its most vulnerable citizens.

We vote for the latter.

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