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Bentley unveils new mental health plan

By [Dana Beyerle](#)

Times Montgomery Bureau

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MONTGOMERY — Gov. Robert Bentley on Friday unveiled a new mental health plan that restarts construction of the replacement Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa and closes only two of the four mental illness facilities that were to be shuttered.

Bentley announced the plan in a press conference on the site of the replacement Bryce Hospital.

Once that 268-bed facility on the campus of the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center on University Boulevard East is completed, the state will continue to operate it as a facility for the mentally ill.

Bentley said the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa will not close, but will remain open for court-committed forensic patients. The North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur that houses lower-level court-ordered criminal defendants will remain open.

The Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Facility in Tuscaloosa will remain open as originally planned.

The Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon and the Greil Memorial Hospital in Montgomery eventually will close as their patients can be moved into community treatment or other appropriate treatment, Bentley said.

Bentley's new plan alters the original plan outlined in February by Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh.

Asked by legislative budget writers to describe an operating plan if her agency's budget was cut 25 percent, Baugh said she would have to close four of six mental illness hospitals.

The worst-case scenario included eventually moving all court-ordered forensic patients into the new Bryce Hospital, closing the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility and treating mentally ill patients currently in the three hospitals that were to be closed in community settings.

Bentley last month suspended the plan for reevaluation after an outcry arose, especially over the plan to house criminally insane defendants in the replacement Bryce Hospital, ending 151 years of a mental illness hospital presence in Tuscaloosa.

His plan includes eventually shifting into community settings those who can be treated there, but the new Bryce Hospital will remain as a center for the acutely mentally ill and Taylor Hardin and North Alabama will remain in their current uses.



Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley speaks at a press conference, Friday, April 6, 2012 in Tuscaloosa, Ala. Bentley is ordering construction to resume on a new Bryce mental hospital in Tuscaloosa and revising plans to close other mental health facilities. (Michelle Lepianka Carter | Tuscaloosa News)

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"I felt we were going too fast, and I wanted to slow down the process and determine if we can get most of the patients into outpatient settings and whether we needed a state hospital or a safety net for those who can't live in a community setting," Bentley said.

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