



Budget cuts a threat to mentally ill (editorial)

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By

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama _ Plans to close three of the state's four largest psychiatric hospitals may indeed be inevitable and the best way to approach a 25 percent cut in the budget of the state Department of Mental Health.

But advocates for the mentally ill who support the expansion of treatment and care for patients in their own communities are justifiably concerned that the state's political leaders will fall short of providing enough money to do the job right.

The Mental Health Department depends on revenue from the state General Fund, which is expected to come up short by about \$367 million for the fiscal year that will begin Oct. 1. That compares to a budget of about \$1.7 billion for this fiscal year.

To deal with her department's expected loss of revenue, Commissioner Zelia Baugh in February announced that it would lay off about 950 employees and close North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur, Greil Memorial Hospital in Montgomery and Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon by Sept. 30. The Taylor Hardin Medical Secure Facility in Tuscaloosa would close next spring.

To continue care for these hospitals' patients, the department would expand care provided by group homes and other local options. The hospital closings would provide an extra \$30 million in state money and perhaps twice as many federal matching dollars, Baugh told The Birmingham News in a story Monday.

If the hospitals aren't closed, she said, mental health services in communities across the state would have to be cut, and that would double the number of hospitalized patients in less than a month.

Phasing out psychiatric hospitals and providing care in the community has been a long-term national trend in treatment and care for the mentally ill, an approach that has been endorsed and encouraged by advocacy groups.

Representatives for two such groups spelled out their concerns in a recent op-ed piece for The News Feb. 26. The writers are James A. Tucker, an attorney with the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, and Jimmy Walsh, an attorney and president of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill Alabama.

"As of this date," they wrote, "there is very much an open question whether the Department of Mental Health will have adequate funds to provide needed community services in the face of the state hospital closings."

They said the state had not made it clear there will be adequate money to provide transition services for people moving from state hospitals to community settings; that the department will be protected from a budget cut this year; and that it will receive adequate money for the plan in fiscal 2013.

"If adequate funds are not dedicated to the plan," they said, "it will not succeed."

There is good reason for concern, given Alabama's history of inhumane treatment of the of the mentally ill in state hospitals. Shameful abuses and lack of care were exposed in a landmark 1970 federal lawsuit. Alabama wasn't dismissed from *Wyatt v. Stickney*, which established a constitutional right to treatment, until 2003.

The suit was triggered by a cut in the agency's budget that resulted in layoffs, and for several years the state failed to provide enough money to meet even minimum standards of care.

Alabama's treatment of the mentally ill is vastly improved, but those gains could be undercut by the fiscal calamity threatening to wreck the Mental Health Department and other state agencies.

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