

## Huntsville hearing on budget cuts for mental health yields few answers

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By

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama -- Concerns over state cuts for mental health services outnumbered solutions Friday in a Department of Mental Health public hearing at the Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.

As the state deals with **budget cuts of 10.6 percent** for the General Fund for the remaining six and a half months of the fiscal year, mental health officials said they are bracing for a \$29 million cut for fiscal 2013, which will begin Oct. 1.

One answer includes the planned closure of state mental hospitals and shifting patients to community centers around the state.

The crowd drawn to the hearing overflowed the auditorium.

"They have a right to be concerned," said Dr. Tammy Peacock, associate commissioner of the Department of Mental Health. "This is a huge philosophical and structural change. But what has typically happened in other regions is that people walk away understanding a little bit better, and they are a little bit more open-minded."

Definitive answers Friday, though, were few. People in the crowd asked questions about the department's short- and long-term plans to deal with the closing of hospitals.

Peacock said the Mental Health Department intends to have a report on its plans in two weeks and that the department's commissioner, Zelia Baugh, was meeting with Gov. Robert Bentley on Friday to work through some of the issues.

With the funding and timeline for closing the hospitals still uncertain, Peacock said she couldn't answer many of the crowd's questions.

Plans originally called for three state hospitals to be closed by Sept. 30, but **Bentley backed away from that timetable** to reassess the department's status. That reassessment included halting construction on a \$73 million hospital in Tuscaloosa and suspending plans to close the hospitals, including North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur, and the elimination of about 950 jobs.

"I feel like they do not know how much money and time they need," said Pippa Abston, a Huntsville physician who led a protest about budget cuts before the meeting. "We're getting no answers."

"If you read between the lines, Tammy was saying, 'I understand' or 'I agree,' and it doesn't feel like she can do anything about it," she said. "It feels like this is a lot of talk and it's not going to go anywhere without the plan they've got."

Peacock, along with Courtney Tarver, the attorney for the Mental Health Department, stressed repeatedly that no hospitals would be closed until a way to handle those patients is established.

Establishment of those community centers will take money, too, people in the crowd told Peacock.

"Consumers and family members and stakeholders need to have their concerns expressed," Peacock said afterward. "We all have the same concerns. Is there going to be a political world to fund it? How do we do this transition? The logistics?"

Peacock said the department is working with the U.S. Housing and Urban Development agency to find money for the transition. The department is also seeking federal grants to supplement state funding.



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About a dozen protestors held a rally on St. Clair Street today to raise awareness about budget cuts facing the Department of Mental Health. (The Huntsville Times photo/Michael Mercier)

"I'm frustrated with our Legislature," said Abston, "for not giving us the money we need to do it, but I'm also frustrated with the Department of Mental Health for not saying this is a minimum amount of money we need to accomplish the transition and this is a minimum amount of time.

"I think they need to stand up and give some of those numbers to us and to the legislators."

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