



Budget blow to mental health (Editorial)

Published: Tuesday, March 27, 2012, 8:22 AM Updated: Tuesday, March 27, 2012, 8:27 AM



By **Mike Hollis, The Huntsville Times**

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama _ In the face of the most serious state budget problem in decades, advocates for the mentally ill left a public hearing in Huntsville Friday with little in the way of detailed assurances on the future of care for patients with the most serious problems.

Compare that with the way Gov. Robert Bentley is promising he won't let inmates out of overcrowded prisons because of a budget crisis. Many state agencies will come up more than 20 percent short of the money they were promised for the fiscal year that will end Sept. 30.

Bentley has called on the Legislature to appropriate an extra \$45.3 million from the General Fund this fiscal year to prevent early release of any prisoners. The Alabama Department of Mental Health would do well to have Bentley as a patron.

Only a few weeks ago the Mental Health Department announced it would close three mental hospitals, release their patients and cut 950 jobs to cut costs for the fiscal year that will begin Oct. 1.

Some of the savings would be redirected to communities around the state to help them provide care for patients when they need temporary hospitalization.

Moving the mentally ill from hospitals into communities has been a long-term national trend in an attempt to provide care in more humane and "less restrictive" settings required by court decisions.

But the department's plan would have given communities far too little time to prepare and did not spell out how much money they could count on to open in-patient facilities and more group homes by Sept 30.

Alabama has a long history of providing substandard treatment for the mentally ill except under federal court order. So, advocates have been skeptical the state would provide both enough money and time for communities to prepare for the transition from hospitals to local treatment.



Alabama Capitol building in Montgomery.

And that was before Bentley a little more than a week ago announced he was cutting budgets by 10.6 percent in midyear for a number of state agencies.

Meanwhile, state officials put on hold plans to close the hospitals. Bentley also ordered suspension of construction of a \$73 million mental hospital in Tuscaloosa while officials reassess the department's finances. The delays could give community mental officials more time to get their plans in place to take on the added responsibility of more seriously ill patients. But no one, as yet, is talking specifics.

Dr. Tammy Peacock, associate mental health commissioner, told the overflow crowd at the hearing Friday she could not answer many of the questions because of the uncertainties over money and the timeline to close the hospitals.

But she and Courtney Tarver, the attorney for the Mental Health Department, stressed that no hospitals would be closed until a way to handle those patients is established.

Dr. Pippa Abston, a Huntsville pediatrician and president of the local chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, was among those who left the hearing deeply dissatisfied.

"I'm frustrated with our Legislature for not giving us the money we need to do it," she told The Times' Paul Gattis, "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."

Critics say the department was trying to close the hospitals before it had the beds elsewhere for their patients. That could put people who need close supervision on the street, in ordinary hospitals or in jail.

Thus far, it seems as if the state has been making up its plans as it goes along, and that's no way to run a government. The mentally ill, their families and the public deserve better, and they deserve a governor just as committed to their welfare as he is to keeping inmates in prison.

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