

River Region leaders begin tackling mental health care issues

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(Photo: The Register)

In Alabama and around the nation, the mentally ill are often warehoused in jails and prisons and offered little to no treatment for their diseases – and that leads to recidivism, higher costs for communities and sometimes violent tragedy.

A resolution recently signed by county commissioners in Montgomery, Autauga, Elmore and Lowndes counties is a welcome, if small, step toward reducing the number of people with mental illnesses in the region's lockups.

As the *Advertiser's* Kym Klass reported, the resolution is in support of a national initiative called Stepping Up, and shows the four counties acknowledge the severity of the problem and are committed to tackling it, including

with funding,

That acknowledgement is timely and dovetails with the Alabama Legislature's efforts to address the mental health issues of inmates in the state's prisons, which contribute to an ongoing overcrowding crisis.

Last year lawmakers passed new policy recommendation on parole and probation from the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force to make a dent in overcrowding and came up with some extra funding to begin to implement them.

It's going to be tougher, in another dismal budget year, to keep that momentum rolling on the mental health issue.

Some 12 percent of the state prison population suffers from mental illness, according to the Department of Corrections, though that may be a low-ball estimate. Many get stuck in a revolving door, in and out of the corrections system because they can't find treatment programs after they're released.

Task force chairman Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, and other members deserve credit for pushing for improved access to mental health care before, during and after incarceration as a way to reduce crime and ultimately cut state prison costs.

But it remains to be seen if tax-averse lawmakers in the GOP-led Senate and House will be willing to fund the programs.

Meanwhile, federal reforms are also part of the puzzle in addressing the dearth of mental health care options available to persons who have been incarcerated. The Affordable Care Act established parity for mental health treatment, meaning mental illnesses must be covered in a manner equitable to other diseases or conditions.

But there are too few providers to aid the estimated one in five Americans who need some form of treatment, from substance abuse programs to psychiatric intervention, at any given time.

A bill with bipartisan backing, the Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act, would direct funds to jail diversion initiatives and bolster community mental health programs, among other measures.

Instead of wasting time trying to dismantle Obamacare out of partisan spite, Congress should get to work on such practical reforms to help communities address the daunting mental health crisis, in jails and elsewhere.

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