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Cuts protested: Legislature asked to rethink mental health funds

The Clarke County ARC of Alabama serves 17 people in their homes. But Terry Pezent, executive director of the Clarke County ARC, said budget cuts would wipe out that program, and many others.

"That's the scary part about this," Pezent said Wednesday morning outside the Alabama State House. "Clarke County is a rural area, at the southern end of the Black Belt. There aren't a lot of options for employment or those things. We're kind of nervous about how things are looking in our area."

Those fears lead Pezent and a crowd of 300 to 400 people to rally outside the State House, urging the Legislature not to make deep cuts to the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

"We can't afford to lose this," said Matthew Grafton, a client of the Jackson County ARC who has cerebral palsy. Grafton credited the program's services with allowing him to live independently. "I say to the people who want to cut this, shame on you. We need this."

Grafton and the other protesters voiced opposition to a 25 percent cut in services

to the department, a proposal that has not been made by either Gov. Robert Bentley or legislative leaders. Commissioner Zelia Baugh, however, said later Wednesday that her plan to close three hospitals -- including Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery -- and consolidate two others would absorb the brunt of a 25 percent cut, while leaving enough money for the community services that protesters wanted maintained.

In addition, Baugh said, moving 525 patients currently in hospital care to community-based centers would allow the department to apply for federal money to cover those patients' costs.

"By closing the hospitals, we are able to have \$29 million in savings, and receive new federal money," she said.

The cuts would also lead to the elimination of 948 positions, either through layoffs, retirement or attrition.

The Legislature is still working on the

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state's 2013 General Fund budget, which covers most non-education services in the state and faces a \$366 million shortfall in the 2013 fiscal year. Gov. Robert Bentley's proposed 2013 budget would cut state funding for Mental Health from \$116.3 million to \$104.6 million, a cut of 10 percent.

Baugh said Wednesday that whatever budget she receives, she will move forward with the hospital closings.

"There's no more bone or bone marrow to cut," Baugh told supporters at the rally. "We have to look at what is viable for us as an agency, to infuse \$30 million into community programs."

Those at the rally supported Baugh's proposal.

"That gives us opportunities to look at different programs or alternative programs to accommodate people leaving those facilities," said Tammie McCurry, executive director of HRDI in Montgomery, which runs group homes in Montgomery and Dothan. "It gives those individuals another opportunity to be in a community-based program."

Tom Holmes, executive director of The Arc of Alabama and a speaker at the rally, said hospital money could free up state funding for mental service providers.

"The last two years have seen major cuts in rates paid to providers," he said. "By freeing up money in hospitals, it could free

up more money to restore rates to providers."

Closing Greil would eliminate 139 jobs and require the movement of 77 patients into the community. Greil has a special unit that provides assistance to the deaf or hard of hearing; Baugh said the department was partnering with Chilton-Shelby Mental Health Center, serving Chilton and Shelby counties, to provide services to those patients.

Lawmakers at Wednesday's budget hearing expressed concern about the scope of layoffs, and said Baugh should have included them in discussions on closing state hospitals.

"I'd like to encourage the department that as you look at the possibility of closures, to include legislators, so we're not reading about it in the headlines," said Rep. Greg Wren, R-Montgomery.

Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa, whose district will see a number of closings,

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questioned whether the department would be able to have services ready for patients by the time the hospitals are set to close.

"The safety net we're referring to is shrinking, but the pressure and responsibility on it is increasing," he said.

Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, whose district includes a hospital slated for closure, said he appreciated the department's presentation. The senator, who chairs the Senate's Finance and Taxation General Fund committee, said the proposed cut to the department could be larger.

"In this fiscal environment, anything's possible," he said.

Baugh, for her part, hoped her hospital proposal would be enough for budget makers.

"I can live with 25 percent," she said. "But I don't want to."

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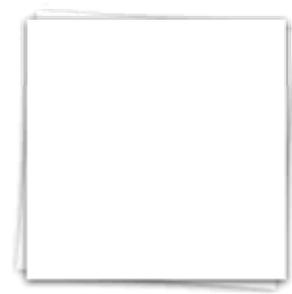


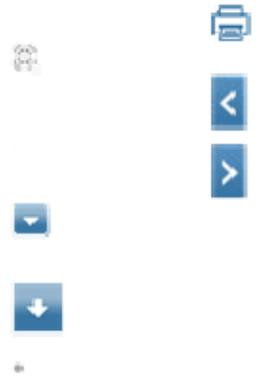
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