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Area mental health hospital to close Aug. 31

Montgomery's Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital will close its doors Aug. 31, part of what the state's new mental health leader described Monday as a nationwide move toward community and private care as budgets tighten.

The facility will stop taking new patients by Aug. 17 to focus on the release and placement of its 62 current patients.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health is working with the directors of the three community health centers in Greil's 11-county area to "beef up their services" ahead of the move, ADMH Commissioner Jim Reddoch said. Patients who cannot currently be placed in community care could be taken to Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa, he added.

Preparations are under way for a similar process at Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon, which Reddoch said will close "soon" after Greil. And that may not be the last closing.

"I think the long-range plan would have always been to close everything except Bryce Hospital," said Reddoch, who took over this month for the retiring Zelia Baugh. "(Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility and North Alabama Regional Hospital) got left

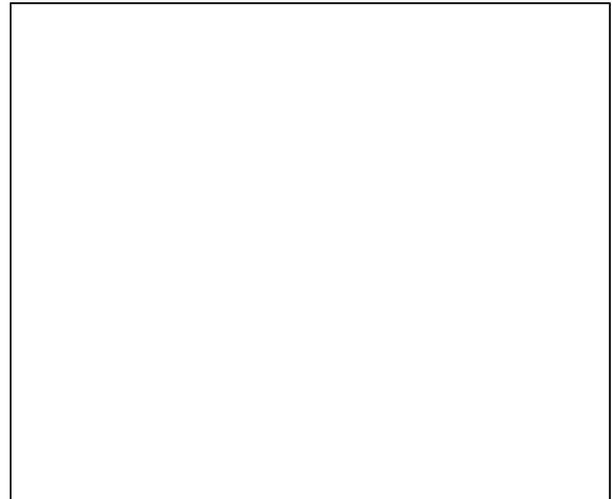
open during this phase. I'm not sure what the future may hold there."

A job fair will be held Wednesday for Greil Hospital's 119 current employees. Human resources director Kim Boswell said plans are in the works to provide retraining through the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs' Rapid Response Team. A small transition team will remain at the facility after Sept. 1 to handle paperwork and other loose ends.

Many of the employees, though, were more worried Monday about how their longtime patients will adjust to life away from Greil Hospital.

"Some of the patients, this is their home. This is their family," said Greil Hospital worker Dan Mengel, who has been in the industry for nearly 27 years. "Either they don't have any family on the outside, or their family just gave up on them. They'll leave for six months, maybe even a week or two, and they'll come back here."

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“I guess you just have to accept what it is, as-is, and make the best of it.”

In his 25 years with the department, Reddoch said he’s seen the closing of facilities in Thomasville and Eufaula, three nursing homes and five developmental centers before Greil and Searcy hospitals. He said that’s part of a federally led push toward serving patients in communities and in the least restrictive environments.

“That’s just the name of the game,” Reddoch said. “You just close and downsize, and close and downsize.”

Once it is reconfigured and expanded to 268 beds within about a year, he expects Bryce Hospital to become the new central mental health hub for the state.

The ultimate direction, he said, is a return to the structure similar to Alabama’s mental health care landscape in the 1960s. Reddoch recalled how in those days his grandfather, who was a probate judge, would put newly committed patients in the back seat of his car and drive them from Decatur to Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa because that was the only option.

“For different reasons, we’re kind of going back to that original model,” Reddoch said. “You’ve got some budget-driven issues and some other issues that are more related to doing the right thing.

“And if you don’t agree that it’s right, you can wait until the Justice Department tells you that it is.”

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