

# Public forum addresses mental health concerns

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As the Alabama Legislature continues to hammer away at finding a solution to address a General Fund shortfall, agencies across the state are speaking out about how deep cuts would affect services.

Concerns over cuts to mental health funding was the impetus behind a meeting held Thursday at the Decatur Utilities auditorium, which featured several of North Alabama's top mental health officials. The public discussion was sponsored by the Foundation for Mental Health, the Mental Health Center of North Alabama and the Mental Health Association of Morgan County.

Nearly all the speakers told the 100-plus people in attendance to call their legislators to express their concern over how a decrease in services could lead to an increase in private hospitalizations and police incidents. No legislator from Morgan or Limestone counties was in attendance at Thursday's meeting.

Both Decatur Police Chief Ed Taylor and Morgan County Sheriff Ana Franklin spoke to law enforcement concerns.

"As a law enforcement officer, we have the unfortunate task of dealing with individuals with mental illness," Taylor said. "If we have more individuals not getting the treatment, we're going to have more interaction between them and law enforcement. I understand we're in tough economic times, and I know cuts have to happen somewhere, just not here."

The Legislature had initially eyed a plan that would have cut the department of mental health by as much as 20 to 30 percent. The budget approved May 14 by the House Ways and Means Committee reduced those cuts to 5 percent. Still, mental health advocates said Thursday those cuts are still too deep to ensure mentally ill patients receive the care they need.



## mental health forum

Mental health supporters hold up signs against budget cuts Thursday at a forum on the state of mental health in North Central Alabama. Mental health and law enforcement officials spoke about their concerns over how budget cuts in Montgomery would affect services for mental health patients.

## History repeating?

Some of the speakers Thursday alluded to dark days in the state's history when as many as 5,000 patients were in Bryce Mental Hospital and 3,000 at the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center. The state's deplorable mental health conditions resulted in the Wyatt v. Stickney lawsuit, which created minimum standards for the care and rehabilitation of people with mental illness and mental retardation. The lawsuit, filed in 1970, wasn't considered closed until 2004.

James Tucker, executive director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, was one of the speakers who referenced the lawsuit and the conditions at Bryce in the early 1970s. He recalled living in Tuscaloosa at the time and having a friend who was a reporter for The Tuscaloosa News.

"His beat was to be at the back door (of Bryce) at midnight to see who came out dead," Tucker said.

He then quoted U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson, who said the following about the lawsuit: "If the state fails to shoulder its responsibility, it will find itself back in court as sure as the night follows the day, albeit as a defendant in a new lawsuit seeking enforcement of the well-established principles of Wyatt."

Hoping to sway legislators' decision to cut mental health funding, Tucker's group sent each member of the House and Senate a letter explaining why cutting mental health would be a mistake. The letter also contained a threat.

"(The letter) let them know if they do not fund mental health and (developmental disability) services, we're ready to file Wyatt II," Tucker said. "The simple truth is, politicians in Montgomery have asserted loud and proud for the last five or six years they're going to cut to the bone. Now, they've done it. If that's what they wanted, we should applaud them and say, 'Thank you.' You've cut to the bone, now don't suck the marrow. It's getting beyond ridiculous."

Franklin asserted that the legislators' threats to decrease mental health funding couldn't happen unless they plan on decreasing the amount of people who are mentally ill.

As of Thursday evening, she said, there were 122 people in the Morgan County Jail who had mental illness, which was roughly one-fourth of the jail population.

The cost for taking care of the mentally ill isn't cheap, she said, and could cost as much as \$1,000 per month for just medication, not counting doctors and psychiatric nurses who also make jail visits.

Even worse, she said, is that some mentally ill prisoners stay longer than they should have to because they're waiting on beds to become available at facilities elsewhere.

"From a law enforcement standpoint, we are not mental health providers and we're not doctors," she said. "We are not the people who need to be caring for the mentally ill. It's extremely unfair to us and the people we serve."

## Personal perspectives

Perhaps the most heartfelt testimony of the public forum came from mental health patients. Some gave testimonials about how their lives had been improved through mental health services, while others asked how the situation in Montgomery could be helped.

Steve Pendergrass was one of those who spoke about how mental health services had improved his life more than a decade after being diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. Pendergrass said he was at North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur 11 years ago and did whatever he could to avoid being recommitted.

He said the outpatient care he received helped him learn more about his illness and helped him grow. He said seeking help also allowed him to stop drinking, quit smoking and get his life back on track.

He's now traveling across the state playing music and working as a deejay at events.

"I was ashamed of my mental illness because there was so much stigma," he said. "I have mental illness, but it's not all of me. ... I don't think they need to be cutting the budgets; they need to put more into it. I hope our politicians will listen to what we need."