



## City's budget woes putting squeeze on agencies (op-ed)

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By **Press-Register Editorial Board**

*Editor's note: The heads of five nonprofit agencies in Mobile — AltaPointe, Penelope House, Boys & Girls Clubs, Child Advocacy Center and Mobile Area Education Foundation — co-authored this essay in response to the possibility that city funding may be reduced or eliminated. Their names and titles are listed at the end. □*

□ Special to the Press-Register □

The city of Mobile allocates varying levels of funding to human service organizations that assist residents whose capacity to care for themselves has been exceeded by circumstances beyond their control.



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Individuals needing help usually fall into this category through no fault of their own. They are at-risk children and adolescents who are often abused and neglected, abused women, the mentally ill, and homeless individuals and families.

Although these nonprofit organizations do not solely depend on the city's financial assistance, funds received from the city pay for critical services that otherwise would not exist. □

□ **AltaPointe Health Systems** □

AltaPointe Health Systems is the sole safety-net provider for public mental health care in Mobile. With city funds, AltaPointe provides assessment and stabilization of individuals experiencing homicidal and suicidal tendencies and who are being processed for involuntary commitment by the Mobile County Probate Court.

This funding supports 24-hour acute hospital services for approximately 29,900 bed days each year at BayPointe Hospital.

Annually, AltaPointe provides mental health, substance abuse and developmental disability services to more than 13,000 people. AltaPointe's board of directors, which is appointed by the city and county of Mobile, has identified and prioritized critical community services for the uninsured and underinsured funded with the city's appropriation.

Without city funding, AltaPointe could not provide these services. Unreimbursed care would increase to a level that would force AltaPointe to close BayPointe, the city's only free-standing psychiatric hospital.

Such a closure would negatively affect the local justice system, public safety, high school drop-out rates and emergency response systems. AltaPointe would be forced to reduce staff significantly, causing far-reaching social and economic repercussions.

Without city funding, outpatient and prevention substance abuse services for both adults and children would be reduced, causing further strain on the city's law enforcement, criminal justice and emergency response systems.

Social science research indicates that the populations AltaPointe serves through these critical services would likely turn to emergency medical services and/or wind up incarcerated in Mobile's already overcrowded Metro Jail.

In addition to the critical services outlined above, the AltaPointe 310 Board passes portions of its city-allocated funding to several programs, including SOMI House, a rehabilitation center for the adult mentally ill; MARC, a day habilitation and residential services organization for the intellectually and developmentally disabled; the Drug Education Council; L'Arche, a residential housing/activity center for the intellectually disabled; and The Salvation Army/Dauphin Way Lodge, an adult outpatient substance abuse screening, treatment and prevention service. □

#### □ **Child Advocacy Center** □

With the \$112,500 received from the city of Mobile, the Child Advocacy Center provides services not offered by any other local agency.

Without these funds, critical public safety services for area child victims of sexual abuse and their non-offending family members will have to be curtailed.

We will no longer have our current three full-time counselors. Instead, there will be one full-time counselor and one half-time counselor, resulting in the denial of counseling services to 202 child abuse victims, who now annually receive 1,162 free counseling sessions.

There will no longer be a full-time family advocate/court advocate coordinator, as this will become a half-time position.

Without this funding, there will be no transportation services for child abuse victims and their families within the city limits of Mobile. This will deny our comprehensive investigative and healing services to 138 children/families who last year received 345 transportation services to and from the center, to and from forensic medical examinations, and to and from the Mobile County Courthouse.

Without the free transportation services, 75 children will not be able to receive forensic medical exams, during which evidence is collected by a pediatrician working for the Advocacy Center under contract from the USA College of Medicine's Department of Pediatrics.

Without the funds received from the city of Mobile, we will lose leverage that helps us to obtain matching funds from the Mobile County Commission. □

#### □ **Penelope House**

Penelope House depends upon city funding for the required match for several of our federal grants.

Loss of city money will result in the loss of \$319,000 in grant money from ADECA. This will lead to layoffs of 16 critical employees who provide direct client services in our shelter and in our court advocacy programs.

In 2011, Penelope House sheltered 912 victims: 385 adults and 536 children. Penelope House served 29,100 meals, received 2,646 crisis calls, attended 5,121 court appointments with victims, and assisted 1,256 victims with Protection from Abuse or No Contact Orders.

With reduced staff and loss of funds for food, utilities and other operating expenses, we anticipate we will not be able to provide services to all victims of domestic violence and their children — and this will be the first time for such an occurrence in Penelope House's 33-year history. Never before have we had to turn away those seeking safety and refuge.

Loss of city money for law enforcement will also impact Penelope House, the only agency responsible for providing shelter and protective services to victims of the crime of domestic violence in our city. We work as a team with all law enforcement who are the first responders to calls for assistance from victims of domestic violence. Law enforcement personnel bring these victims to us for safety and shelter.

We look to law enforcement to protect our clients, shelter and staff. When their services are reduced, our clients — 60 percent of whom are children — will be more at risk of physical harm or death.

Additionally, when perpetrators threaten our shelter, we can anticipate slower response time by law enforcement with reduced personnel. This could lead to harm or the death of clients and of our staff. □

## □ Boys & Girls Clubs of South Alabama

According to data released by Voices for Alabama's Children, 27 percent of the youth of Mobile County live in poverty and 41 percent reside in single-parent families.

Eighteen percent of families are considered vulnerable, with 18.7 percent living below the poverty line. Thirteen percent of all births are to teen mothers. The current high school graduation rate is 52.7 percent.

Nationally, more than 25 percent of all school-age children are alone and unsupervised after school. Without supervision and structured activities, youth are at greater risk of being victims of crime or participating in anti-social behaviors.

The effectiveness of Boys & Girls Club programs in addressing issues which confront youth and their families was validated by a 2007 Harris Poll of BGCA Alumni which indicated that 90 percent of those surveyed had at least a high school diploma or GED. The national percentage is 87 percent.

Sixty-two percent stated that Boys & Girls Clubs helped them to become more committed to their education and 45 percent stated that the club experience helped them to graduate from high school. Eighty-one percent stated that club participation helped them to develop a sense of responsibility to their community. Eighty-five percent said the clubs helped them to learn right from wrong.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of South Alabama provide afterschool and summer programs for young people ages 6 through 18 at four locations within the city of Mobile:

- Optimist Boys & Girls Club in R.V. Taylor Plaza on Michigan Avenue in Maysville
- Roger Williams Boys & Girls Club in the Roger Williams public housing complex in Toulminville
- Kiwanis Boys & Girls Club on Rice Street in Crichton
- And a new site, at Mae Eanes Middle School on Duval Street in Maysville

We offer education programs that include tutoring, homework help, and computer technology; character and leadership development programs that teach members to resist drugs and gang activity; arts programs that develop creativity; and sports and nutrition programs that teach practices to promote good health.

Three years ago, the \$419,450 city allocation for the Boys & Girls Clubs was reduced by 10 percent, as were the allocations for all nonprofits. That reduction is still in place, and we continue to receive \$377,500 for 2011-2012. Last year, we served over 700 club members and 2,000 other youth in the city.

Without the support of the city, we shall have to close at least two, if not three, of the clubs located within the city. We will not be able to continue to offer many young people the preparation necessary for them to enjoy the benefits of the bright future that lies ahead for Mobile. □

#### □ **Mobile Area Education Foundation**

All of us are looking toward the day the economy turns around, but until that time, our city's leaders have the difficult task of taking bold steps to secure Mobile's future. In this economic downturn, we cannot afford either the further loss of jobs or the reduction in vital services offered through performance contractors.

Representing only 1.5 percent of the city's budget, performance contractors — through the leverage of their city funding — bring in millions of additional dollars through grants and private sector matching.

Without this good stewardship of city dollars, we cannot guarantee a healthier, more educated Mobile population. Our students will be far less able to meet the challenges of a new and expanded economy.

We must have a workforce ready for the thousands of jobs brought in by the recruitment of new businesses and industries. We must have a flourishing community for the arts. We must have a city that attracts tourism.

The success of our K-12 school system is the very foundation of economic development. The recently announced Airbus Assembly Line Mobile excited us all, but with the promise of more jobs, more revenue and more people comes the realization that we must continue on a path to keep our kids in school.

Low graduation rates in our public schools contribute to virtually all of the critical challenges Mobile faces. When teens are not in school, they are more likely to engage in drug abuse and criminal activity, have poor health and have a reduced quality of life.

The continuing partnership between the Mobile County Public School System and the Mobile Area Education Foundation is answering the call of the public to graduate students ready to fill the workforce demands of advanced manufacturing in plants like ThyssenKrupp, Austal, ST Aerospace Mobile, Airbus North American Engineering and, soon, Airbus.

Every year, if only 1,908 additional students successfully leave high school ready for college or careers, Mobile would see a \$23 million increase in yearly earnings, an \$18 million increase in spending, a \$43 million increase in home purchases, and a \$1.5 million increase in state and local tax revenues. □

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As the executive directors of these five major nonprofits, we respectfully ask responsible citizens of the city to contact their elected city officials and request that service contracts, so vital to the preservation of a good quality life for us all, be kept in the city budget.

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