

ADMH to close state mental health facilities

By Nicole Loggins

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COLUMBIANA – The Alabama Department of Mental Health has plans to close numerous mental health facilities across the state.

The department had originally scheduled the closings for the end of September 2012, but that deadline was recently lifted.

The state department's decision to begin the process of transferring mental health care from state institutions to community group homes has left many with questions and concerns, including many state probate judges and mental health advocates.

"My issue is the approach that's been taken," said Shelby County Probate Judge Jim Fuhrmeister. "It seems to me that they needed a plan first. I think everybody is in shock, like 'what's next?'"

The affected facilities would include Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon, North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur, Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery and Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa.

"We understand that folks who are involved on an everyday basis are going to have concerns and until we get a plan out to them, we understand that," said Tony Thompson, spokesman for the state Department of Mental Health.

Fuhrmeister is concerned that those suffering from mental illness could end up in correctional facilities as a result of inadequate secure psychiatric hospital facilities, providing an additional burden on law enforcement agencies.



"There's a small group of people who are dangerous to themselves or to others and they must remain in a secure mental health facility," Fuhrmeister said. "There is no plan for these individuals at this time."

When asked about the effects the closings could have on law enforcement agencies, Thompson said the state Department of Mental Health would address those concerns in its plan.

"We've had representatives from sheriff's offices, probate judges and some city law enforcement officials and we've heard those same concerns. We're including those concerns and ways to overcome them in the plan," Thompson said.

Fuhrmeister said there is currently a shortage of secure psychiatric treatment beds available for those he involuntarily commits to a psychiatric facility.

"It is not uncommon to have to wait a day or more for a bed to become available. In the meantime, the respondent remains in the community," he said.

