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MONTGOMERY

State mental health head: Closings are necessary

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman and Mary Sell
 Of the TimesDaily

Representatives from the Arc of the Shoals on Wednesday attended the Department of Mental Health legislative budget hearing in Montgomery and they liked what they heard.

The local delegation was part of the estimated 700 mental health professionals, advocates and consumers gathered at the Capitol to voice displeasure with severe cuts to the state's mental health budget.

With the announcement in early February of a probable 25 percent cut to the Department of Mental Health's fiscal year 2013 budget, plans got under way to minimize the impact.

Arc of Alabama President Murray Townsend said to cut such a significant portion of the budget would certainly mean closure of some successful key programs across the state. In addition, the waiting list of those individuals in need of services would cease to be addressed, Townsend said.

Department of Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh submitted a plan to close four of the state's six mental hospitals, making those services community based. She defended the plan during a hearing in Montgomery on Wednesday.

If the plan succeeds, Baugh said, budget cuts for fiscal year 2013 would be eliminated, with most patients being moved into community-based care by Sept. 30.

She said closure of the state's institutional hospitals is the only way Alabama's mental-health system can continue to operate without increased revenue.

Baugh laid out her argument for closing four state mental hospitals, including one in Decatur, and praised the alternative community-based providers as better, more cost-effective care.

"You don't have to send a patient to an enormous institution that isn't cost efficient and think that's the best we can do," Baugh told lawmakers.

Last week, Baugh proposed closing the North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur, along with others in the state, as a cost-savings measure.

In all, about 948 of the state's 1,555 mental health employees would be laid off statewide and at least 473 hospital residents moved.

Baugh said she didn't view the hospitals' closures as a bad thing.

"We are making history," she said about change. "But that doesn't seem to be part of the conversation."

Townsend said he recognizes level funding isn't altogether positive for the mental health department, but it's better than the projected cuts.

"While level funding doesn't keep up with increase labor, transportation and other operating costs, most service providers will be able to survive this difficult year," Townsend said "Many jobs will be lost, but the quality of services provided will actually improve and be less expensive."

Bryce Hospital and the Mary Stark Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center in Tuscaloosa would remain open, but Bryce would be repurposed to house court-committed criminal or forensic patients.

Part of the conversation in Decatur now revolves around the future of the local hospital, and its employees.

Lawmakers are trying to court the Alabama Department of Corrections to take control of the facility when the move is made in late September.

Sen. Arthur Orr and Rep. Terri Collins, both Decatur Republicans, said that corrections department Commissioner Kim Thomas toured the facility late last week. The idea is that it would be used to house inmates with chronic illness.

"They were very impressed with the facility and its upkeep," Collins said.

In his proposed general fund budget, Gov. Robert Bentley recommended a \$12 million cut, which assumes no proration in this year's remaining budget.

Bentley has said he will support Baugh's plan.

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Townsend said he expects support for the plan from the local legislative delegation as well.

"It's a plan everyone can support," Townsend said. "It's not something that will be pleasant to carry out, but it seems to be the only answer. I admire Commissioner Baugh for making the tough decisions."

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