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Probate judges concerned about closing mental health hospitals

By Jordan Bradley
Staff Writer

The possible closing of a mental health hospital and the planned closing of other facilities in the state of Alabama are drawing concern from probate judges and a local mental health advocate.

North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur is facing a possible closure some time in September and, according to a release from the Department of Mental Health, both Bryce Hospital and Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa will be closed when a new community-based facility opens in 2013.

Closing the facilities reportedly is a step toward new facilities that will focus on more regional care, but according to Lauderdale County Probate Judge Dewey Mitchell, it could signal a bigger problem.

"My personal opinion is that it sounds like this is a going-out-of-business step for the Department of Mental Health," Mitchell said. "If that were to happen, the ripple that would occur for people with mental illness and their families would be catastrophic.

"It would impact literally thousands of lives of people in the state that suffer from mental illness and will impact everything in the state of Alabama probate judge system. I see nothing positive that's coming out of this."

In a recent release from the Department of Mental Health, Commissioner Zelia Baugh said the department is focusing toward more community-based programs for people with mental illnesses.

"As more patients are moved from large mental health facilities to more customized community-based programs, we will find ways to maintain and improve the quality of care for each individual," Baugh said in the release. "Every patient will be assessed for individual needs, and we want to assure patients' families — and the public — that all proper steps will be followed to provide the highest-quality care and to protect the public's safety."

Residential programs do exist to help mentally ill patients, but there is a risk, said Betty Robertson, an advocate for the National Alliance on Mental Illness and a member of Riverbend Center for Mental Health board of directors.

"A lot of people with mental illness are caught up in the middle, and go back and forth to the hospital, to the jail," Robertson said. "They become depressed, they become suicidal. Their judgment is so poor that they get kicked out of where they are living."

For both Mitchell and Colbert County Probate Judge Tommy Crosslin, hospitals such as North Alabama Regional and Bryce are extremely important because these locations are where many people with an acute mental illness will be transferred if they appear in probate court.

"Just off the cuff, it's very concerning," Crosslin said. "I know they've been trying for years to do this community thing, like halfway houses and to get them to function in society again.

"But you have to get them to that point. That's what the hospital was used for, to get them back on their meds and going again."

Even with an increase in community-based facilities and the psychiatric ward at Eliza Coffee Memorial Hospital providing care for short-term patients, Mitchell said trying to place people who receive a court-ordered petition for treatment and stabilization will be difficult without a facility like the one in Decatur.

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"We are fortunate to have a short-term care (program) in ECM, but if short-term care is not possible, we have Decatur to send patients for further treatment," Mitchell said. "If there's another possibility for long-term treatment, I'm not aware of it."

Robertson said Riverbend is currently doing well, but without the hospitals, Riverbend and other community programs could easily be overwhelmed.

"Hospitals are going to do the best job with people who are acutely mentally ill," Robertson said. "I know that they cost more to run ... but I don't think enough community programs are going to be made available in time."

Robertson said a move toward more community- and residence-based treatment services for people with mental illness will require more crisis stability units and even more homes.

"The reason they're closing the facilities is to put more money into the community," Robertson said. "If all this works out, it's good, but I don't know how they will get it in place in time."

Crosslin said he is fielding emails and gathering more information from other probate judges on the issue, but they are planning to do what they can to help people affected by mental illness.

"Just because they have a mental illness doesn't mean that we can stop treating them like human beings and just cart them off," Crosslin said. "I think some people have made a hasty judgment. I feel very sure that we will do whatever we can do to get some things changed. There are people we need to serve.

"We need some answers, and we will certainly be (in Montgomery) and wherever we need to go to oppose this closing. It's not an acceptable answer."



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