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## Plans in place for hospital closings

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman  
Staff Writer

John Pinion knows what it's like to be dependent on his community's mental health services, and said a plan to close four of the state's mental health hospitals gives him cause for concern.

Pinion, a Florence resident and longtime member of the Shoals area's National Alliance on Mental Illness, has advocated for better services for those battling mental illness for more than 25 years.

His fears are two-fold: the (projected) closing of nearby North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur would mean he wouldn't have help available nearby for his wife and son, if needed. And, the closing of the four hospitals and relocation of those patients into community programs would be costly and likely force cuts in local mental health services.

Last fiscal year, the North Alabama Regional Hospital had 29 adults committed from Colbert, Franklin and Lauderdale counties through probate courts and 11 so far this year.

"It's good to get consumers out of the hospital setting, but where's the money to establish the services for them in the community?" Pinion said. "The dollars aren't there, so it's going to come back to the cities and counties, and they don't have that kind of money."

When Alabama Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh heard the state's mental health budget was in line to be slashed 25 percent, she began planning a way to avoid the funding crisis that would undoubtedly wreak havoc on services offered statewide. The plan is to close hospitals in Decatur, Greil Hospital in Montgomery, Sercy Hospital in Mt. Vernon north of Mobile, and Taylor Hardin in Tuscaloosa. The Harper Center in Tuscaloosa will remain open to treat geriatric patients and a new Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa is under construction, slated to open next spring.

Baugh is working under a tight deadline of having those facilities closed by the end of September.

Seven months isn't much time to carry out such an ambitious plan, said Bryan Libell, chief executive officer for Riverbend Center for Mental Health in Florence.

"This means there will be more than 500 patients (in state hospitals) to get stabilized and returned to the community," Libell said. "We have fewer admissions to state hospitals than any other area of the state. They can and should be treated in the community. But the money has to be there and that's the missing piece to this puzzle."

He said he fears that by law, the plan can't move quickly enough to close the centers and get services in place in communities.

Baugh said the options were either to close the aging institutions or slash allocations to community programs, which could ultimately force individuals receiving mental health services back into state institutions.

"By closing expensive state facilities and dedicating those limited dollars to additional community capacity, we can avoid this cycle, and at the same time, provide better recovery options for those in our care," Baugh said in a recent release announcing what she called an expansion of community treatment options.

She said in order for the department to close a facility, appropriate community resources must first be in place. Bryce Hospital will become a forensic facility and remain open exclusively for that purpose until the new hospital is complete.

The new hospital will accept and treat all forensic patients sent to the department as criminal commitments by the circuit courts. Closing dates for each of the facilities will be announced soon, she said.

Libell said local mental health centers such as Riverbend can't plan for seven months down the road because, "there is no funding plan, and we don't know what the budget is going to be."

But he does expect funding cuts. Riverbend serves more than 6,500 people each year and operates two group homes and various apartments for independent living.

Riverbend provides 10 outpatient programs for adults and children. At any time, any of those programs could be cut, Libell said.

A 25 percent state contract reduction for 2013 would amount to a loss of \$2 million to Riverbend because of the related loss of federal matching money. This year Riverbend is operating on an \$8.9 million budget, down about \$400,000 from last year.

Officials at the state department of mental health said they will have a plan in place by the end of March.

Baugh said that by using community providers, such as Riverbend and other local mental health centers, as well as local hospital psychiatric units, the state can access additional federal dollars not available in the state institutional setting.

State institutions receive little federal funding, relying predominantly on state dollars to operate.

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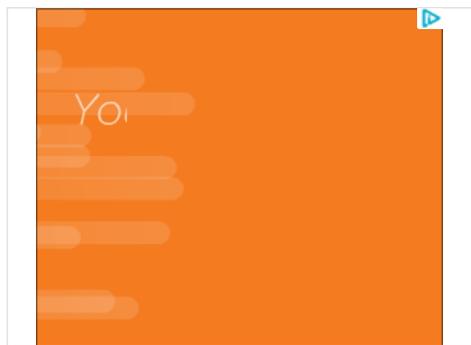
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Pinion said he isn't hopeful that Baugh's plan can be carried out so quickly, beyond the closing of the hospitals.

"I fear we'll have a mess, and it's going to be very difficult for people who need help to get it," he said. "I can see it creating a savings in the long run, but it's going to take time to get the facilities and programs in place to do what the (mental health) hospitals are doing now."

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