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State officials reconsider area hospital closings

**By Mary Sell
Montgomery Bureau**

The Alabama Department of Mental Health might find a new use for its Decatur hospital. But what that may be isn't yet known.

Gov. Robert Bentley and Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh on Wednesday said they are slowing down, but not abandoning, plans to shutter four of the state's mental hospitals. They also said there is a chance that the North Alabama Regional Hospital — or the facilities in Montgomery or Mount Vernon — could remain open in some capacity.

"We are looking at re-purposing an existing facility," Baugh said.

If it did stay open, the regional hospital's residents still would be moved to community-based treatment facilities as suggested in February. Baugh said she didn't know how many of the approximately 150 employees would remain at the hospital.

Baugh and Bentley said Wednesday at a department board meeting that more time is needed to determine how the approximate 500 patients would be cared for in those community-based group homes when the hospitals close.

"We aren't making any permanent decisions right now until we can figure out how everything will fit together," Bentley said.

Originally, it was said the facilities could close by the end of September.

Baugh has had some meetings with community-level providers around the state.

Another meeting is planned in north Alabama on March 23. Baugh said more information about the department of mental health's plans will be available after those meetings are complete.

Meanwhile, Bentley said he recently halted construction on the new Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa. He said it didn't make sense to continue to build a hospital when others are being closed.

"We don't want to continue to spend money if we decide that it not the direction we want to go," Bentley said.

He said construction was costing the state \$15,000 a day.

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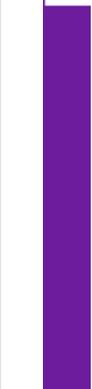
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State Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, was optimistic Wednesday about the Decatur hospital's future.

"I think there is a good possibility that North Alabama may remain open," Orr said. "But we will have to see as (the Department of Mental Health) evaluation process plays out."

In its original closure plan, officials with the state mental health department said they would move all patients housed at Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility and all other court committed patients from around the state to the new hospital.

But if that new facility isn't built, those forensic patients will most likely stay at Taylor Hardin, officials said.

State mental health officials blamed the closures on budget woes and the threat of a 25 percent budget cut. They said if the aging facilities weren't closed, community programs' funding would be slashed. Bentley's proposed general fund budget would cut mental health department funding by about 10 percent to \$104.7 million.

Bentley was adamant Wednesday in his support for Baugh's plan to move mental health care from institutions to group homes. Baugh was appointed by Bentley in 2011.

A dermatologist, Bentley said he visited the original Bryce facility as a medical student 30 years ago and remembers seeing patients lying on the ground.

"I want my legacy as governor to be that we made significant changes in the treatment of the mentally ill," Bentley said.

"If we can, in doing that, protect our state jobs too, we are going to do that," Bentley said.

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