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MONTGOMERY

State not closing regional hospital

By Mary Sell
Montgomery Bureau

North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur will remain open and could serve patients from around the state under Gov. Robert Bentley's new plan for the state's mental health facilities.

Bentley and Department of Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh announced their revised plan Friday, two months after it was said the 147-employee Decatur facility and three others would be closed as cost-cutting measures.

Under the plan, mental health hospitals in Montgomery and Mount Vernon will be shuttered.

Bentley recently said he thought keeping the Decatur site open could mean more jobs, but Department of Health spokesman Tony Thompson said Friday afternoon that "there are no changes planned for the hospital at this point."

Thompson said the facility is at capacity.

During recent public meetings around the state, it was determined that there's a need for an extended-care facility, Thompson said.

Thompson said north Alabama, which serves about 20 counties, could receive patients from anywhere in the state once the Montgomery and Mount Vernon sites close.

"(Any expansion) is going to depend on the transition and closing of those other two hospitals," Thompson said. There is no deadline for those closures.

Bryan Libell, executive director of Riverbend Center for Mental Health in Florence, said he's relieved by the governor's decision.

"We're in agreement that the state doesn't need to operate the same number of beds it did operate, but there's still a need for state hospitals," Libell said.

Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, and other area legislators have had multiple meetings with Baugh and Bentley in the last few months. Orr said he tried to convey to the governor how important the hospital, the largest state-owned operation in Morgan County, and its jobs are to the area.

"We're relieved that the facility is going to stay open and possibly grow slightly, but I'm going to continue to remain wary of the future," he said. "I take it very seriously that we have so few state dollars coming into the county."

Bentley also has ordered work to continue on a 268-bed Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa. He stopped the work in March, saying it didn't make sense to build a new hospital when others were closing.

Meanwhile, the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility and the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center will stay open.

Taylor Hardin originally had been on the list of sites to close.

In February, Baugh recommended closing the four hospitals to save money.

In all, about 948 ADMH employees would have been laid off statewide and at least 473 hospital residents moved to community-based services.

The transition to those community services is still a priority, Thompson said, and the \$43 million the state will save by closing two hospitals will be put into that infrastructure.

Using community-based treatment facilities with 16 or less beds will allow the department to leverage federal Medicaid dollars, officials say. Meanwhile, mental hospitals are purely state funded.

"There will be a saving due to the closure of the other two hospitals," Orr said. "However, I don't believe the saving will be as significant due to the continuance of construction at the (new Bryce hospital)."

Bentley and the Legislature are proposing about \$104.7 million in fiscal 2013 for mental health.

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That's a 10 percent cut from \$116 million this year, before the 10.6 percent cut Bentley announced last month.

"We need an exemption from proration this year and to declare the Department of Mental Health as an essential function of state government," said Murray Townsend, president of The Arc of Alabama, which serves people intellectual and developmental disabilities. "If the state of Alabama doesn't increase taxes, the people served by the mental health department are the ones to suffer and they shouldn't have to bear that burden."

Staff Writer Lisa Singleton-Rickman contributed to this report.



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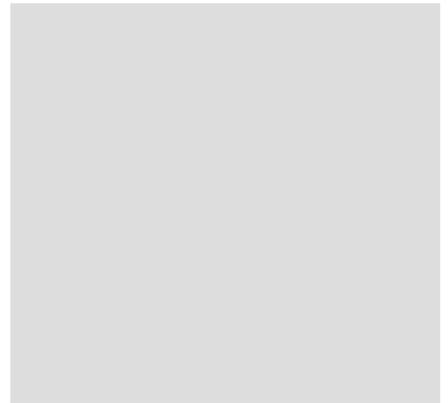
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