

Mental health officials may see level funding at best with state budget

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, June 14, 2015 12:00 am

Susan Haynes likens cuts to the state's mental health budget to giving a loaded gun to a small child.

"I simply can't imagine all the ramifications of what would happen if services were cut," said Haynes, who works as a certified peer specialist for individuals with various mental illnesses.

"Thousands of people in this area get services. When those services are cut, it will mean the police will be dealing with situations they're neither equipped nor qualified for."

Haynes, who was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder 30 years ago, has been recovering the past 16 years and counseling others. Her concerns mirror those of law enforcement officials.

"If individuals lose services, police will have much more involvement with them because these individuals can harm themselves or other people," she said. "They will end up in jail, and they don't belong there. We'll see homelessness spike as well."

It's a major concern for mental health and law enforcement professionals.

Riverbend Center for Mental Health Director Brian Libell said when mental health issues aren't being addressed, "it certainly becomes a public safety issue."

The community health officer program, whereby Riverbend officials coordinate and train law enforcement officers, is in operation in Colbert, Franklin and Lauderdale counties. Lauderdale has four police officers working in community health while Colbert County has two and Franklin County has one.

Hundreds turned out last month at the Riverbend center for a communitywide meeting on the state budget and proposed cuts that would ultimately mean cuts to consumer services.

At that time, officials with the Alabama Department of Mental Health were bracing for cuts of around 11 percent. That number had lowered to 5 percent by the end of the regular legislative session earlier this month.

But even 5 percent isn't acceptable, nor is it workable, Libell said.

The state's mental health budget has increased only four percent during the past 16 years.

Even level funding, which is perhaps the best that can be hoped for this year, doesn't mean level services, according to Libell.

"When we can't provide the oversight for individuals on medication, they end up in local jails and on additional medications," he said. "The reality is that costs have increased in mental health care in areas you might not think about like cybersecurity, things we didn't have to worry about just a few years ago."

Mental health officials refer to consumers of their services as the most vulnerable population in society.

Murray Townsend, an advocate for people with intellectual disabilities and a member of state and local Arc boards, called the threat of budget cuts “something a civilized society doesn’t do.”

“Funding mental health is something we do because it’s decent and right,” he said. “We don’t throw people with intellectual and other disabilities under a bridge somewhere.”

Townsend said there’s got to be a change of mindset among Alabama’s Legislature so cutting mental health funding is never an option.

With a waiting list across the state for day services for the intellectually disabled as well as for group housing, the state’s funding of mental health is critical now.

“The fact that we’re not serving those in need will come back to bite us in economic development,” Townsend said. “All it would take is one big CEO with a special-needs child to see firsthand the lack of services and programs available.”

Local legislators said they’ve had countless calls from constituents pleading for no budget cuts.

State Rep. Lynn Greer, R-Rogersville, said there are some areas of the state’s budget that don’t excite a lot of feelings. Mental health isn’t one of them.

“We’ve gotten a lot of input on the issue, and I’ve talked to other (legislators), and we’re in agreement that the mental health funding needs to be left alone,” Greer said. “I believe it will be.”

Having not approved the budget, the Legislature will reconvene in mid-August for a special session.

“We’ll have to un earmark some areas in both the General and Education Trust funds,” Greer said. “We need that money to be free for people to spend it in the areas it needs to be spent in. I don’t think un earmarking is the sole fix, so we’ll have to look at some kind of taxes. If we can come up with some tax measures, it should certainly help the mental health budget.”

State Rep. Phillip Pettus, R-Greenhill, agrees new revenue is needed.

“I hate to raise taxes, and I’ve always been against it, but it seems there’s no other choice,” he said. “It’s easy to scream ‘raise property taxes’ but that requires a referendum and there’s no time for that. We need to fix this now.”

Pettus said he’s committed to protecting the Department of Mental Health’s funding.

“Whenever law enforcement has to deal with these individuals, it puts everyone involved in the situation at risk for an undesirable outcome,” said Pettus, a retired Alabama state trooper. “Putting them in jail is not the answer.”

Haynes said police shouldn’t be expected to be medical professionals.

“Typically, police can’t recognize a mental illness crisis, and they react the way they’re trained to react,” Haynes said. “I’ve known people to have screaming and panic attacks and police simply don’t know how

to handle it, which is why we have to have experts available to deal with those individuals.”