

Budget cut would devastate mental health services

By Robert Palmer and Lisa Singleton-Rickman Staff Writers | Posted: Sunday, June 14, 2015 12:15 am

Susan Haynes likens cutting 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."

The Alabama Legislature passed a General Fund budget earlier this month with cuts to state agencies. Gov. Robert Bentley promptly vetoed it, and said he will call a special session in August in an effort to find new revenue.

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."

Any budget cuts problematic

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

Riverbend officials coordinate and train community health law enforcement officers in Colbert, Franklin and Lauderdale counties. Lauderdale has four police officers working in community health, Colbert County has two and Franklin County has one.

Hundreds turned out in May at Riverbend for a community meeting on the state budget and proposed cuts that would ultimately reduce consumer services.

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



Mental health

Susan Haynes, who lives in Muscle Shoals, was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder 30 years ago and since has relied on her faith in God and mental health services to remain healthy. She does peer counseling for people with a variety of mental illnesses.

But even 5 percent isn't acceptable, nor is it workable, Libell said. Among the concerns with cuts are closures of community-based programs and facilities, which would leave police to answer calls and interact with people they are not trained to deal with.

The state's mental health budget has increased only 4 percent in the past 16 years.

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

"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 cyber security, things we didn't have to worry about just a few years ago."

State Rep. Marcel Black, D-Tuscumbia, said he is concerned there is little sentiment among lawmakers to raise taxes to pay for essential services.

"There has been talk of new taxes on cigarettes, soft drinks and gaming, but there is always a lot of opposition to any of those," he said. "I'm not real optimistic about funding of services."

A vulnerable population

Mental health officials say consumers of their services are 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 legislators so that 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 especially critical.

"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 say they've had countless calls from constituents pleading for no budget cuts.

'Fix it now'

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. 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."

Greer said lawmakers will have to un earmark some areas in both the general and education trust fund.

"We need that money to be free for people to spend it in the areas it needs to be spent in," Greer said. "I don't think unearmarking 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."

Tuscumbia Police Chief Tony Logan agrees that law enforcement should not be the front line for people with mental illnesses.

"It's going to be devastating," he said. "The way state statutes are written for local jails and detention facilities, we're not equipped to house someone with a mental illness, and we don't have the staffing and facilities."

Logan said law enforcement agencies in Alabama are constantly being asked to do more with less, and adding mental health issues to their workload is neither realistic nor humane.

"We're not going to lock up somebody with cancer or who is dying of a disease, yet someone suffering from mental illness has an illness, and we are being asked to put them in jail for something that is out of their control," he said.

Black said lawmakers will have to do some soul searching when they convene in August.

"There are two sides to an equation. If we want services, legislators will have to realize you have to fund them," he said. "Being against taxes at all costs is saying you are against services that people demand and deserve."