

[PRINT THIS](#) · [CLOSE WINDOW](#)

9/1/12 | 919 views



Font Size: A A A A

No plan to close Decatur hospital

Vote may impact mental health facility's budget

By Mary Sell[Follow @dd_marysell](#)

MONTGOMERY — The Alabama Department of Mental Health closed its Montgomery hospital Friday, but officials reiterated that North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur will remain open.

Now, the 133-employee Decatur facility will have to wait along with the rest of the mental health agencies and community providers that receive state dollars to see if its planned 2013 funding is secured by a constitutional amendment Sept. 18.

Last week, Gov. Robert Bentley was quoted as saying he had asked all state agency leaders to make a plan to cut their budgets by up to 17 percent should the September voter referendum fail. If passed, it would allow the state to take more than \$437 million out of the Alabama Trust Fund, essentially a savings account, to fund state government for the next three years. The General Fund budget is about \$1.6 billion in 2013.

This week, the governor's office said the possible cut is smaller. Also, it's likely some agencies would be cut more than others.

"The governor has told state agencies to expect a 10 to 15 percent cut if the constitutional amendment fails," said Jennifer Ardis, a spokeswoman for Bentley.

If the amendment fails, "It is not going to be pretty," mental health department spokesman Jeff Shackelford said.

"I've heard anything from 13 to 17 percent cuts (if the amendment fails)," Shackelford said. "It's easy math to figure everything in this department would be cut."

The Legislature allocated \$104 million in state funds to the department for the budget year that begins Oct. 1. This year, the department was originally allocated \$116 million, but that was cut midyear to about \$104 million.

State Sen. Arthur Orr, chair of the Senate Finance and Taxation General Fund Committee, said a budget cut doesn't automatically mean closures.

"The patients at North Alabama Regional will need care somewhere on Sept. 19, even if the amendment is voted down," Orr said. "My goal would be to make sure they still receive the care that they need."

"It is difficult to say right now how such a cut would be applied in the mental health department. I don't want to speculate that if the vote went down, that would mean closure of a facility."

Orr and other Morgan County lawmakers lobbied to keep North Alabama Regional open early this year when it was on the list of facilities to be closed. The facility serves several patients from the Shoals.

The closure of Greil Hospital in Montgomery on Friday will be followed by Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon at a to-be-determined date.

Both closures are aimed to downsize the mental health department and put patients in smaller, private facilities that are eligible for more federal match dollars than the large hospitals, which are solely state-funded.

But there are no plans for any changes at North Alabama Regional, Shackelford said.

Bryan Libell, executive director of Riverbend Center for Mental Health in Florence, which sends patients to North Alabama, has praised the state's decision to leave the Decatur hospital open. But he can't imagine how closing the other two hospitals and eliminating more than 300 in-patient beds won't impact North Alabama Regional.

"There probably will be people in Greil and Searcy who will need state hospital beds," he said. "That will put a squeeze on Bryce (Hospital in Tuscaloosa), which in turn could put a squeeze on North Alabama Regional."

As of earlier this week, North Alabama Regional, which serves 20 counties, had 71 patients. Its capacity is 74. The hospital has 133 employees, down slightly from 147 earlier this year. Shackelford said the losses are attributed to attrition, and some vacant jobs will be offered to displaced Greil and Searcy workers.

Shackelford said the state won't know how much money it would save by closing the two hospitals until after the patients are transferred into community-based facilities. Previously, officials had put the figure at about \$48 million, but said much of that would be put into creating community-based care infrastructures.

Meanwhile, the state is also moving forward with a new 268-bed Bryce Hospital.

As for possible funding cuts after September, Libell and other community providers are watching closely. Riverbend receives about \$2.5 million a year from the state to provide mental illness services to about 6,500 clients of all ages each year.

"A 17 percent cut, if that were to be the amount, would be very significant to us," Libell said. During the past five years, funding for outpatient services has been cut by about 15 percent.

State funding cuts are especially harmful because that money is used to obtain federal matches.

"For one state dollar, I'm losing two federal dollars," he said.