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GOP leaders say Bentley's budgets won't pass

Governor proposes cutting mental health department by \$12M

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MONTGOMERY | Gov. Robert Bentley has proposed cutting the Department of Mental Health's General Fund appropriation by \$12 million, but the chairmen of the House and Senate budget committees said Wednesday that Bentley's budget is dead on arrival.

Finance Director Marquita Davis said state agencies can expect cuts of between 10 percent and 24 percent.

Davis, who talked with reporters Wednesday about Bentley's proposed 2012-13 General Fund and Education Trust Fund budgets, said some state agencies, such as the Department of Corrections and Medicaid, will be protected from cuts.

"We put mental health in the 10 percent category," Davis said. "They're going to have to make adjustments in the agency."

She said Bentley's proposed General Fund budget does not require layoffs, but that the head of each agency would have to make that determination.

Bentley, who is from Tuscaloosa, recommends reducing this year's General Fund mental health appropriation of \$116.3 million to \$104.7 million for the next fiscal year. He also recommends a \$1.7 million cut in the Education Trust Fund appropriation for mental health, dropping it to \$24.9 million. It was \$26.6 million this year.

The governor's proposed budgets were dismissed as unrealistic by Rep. Jim Barton, R-Mobile, chairman of the House Ways and Means General Fund Committee, and Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Montrose, chairman of the Senate Finance and Taxation Education Committee.

A cut to the Department of Mental Health will have a significant impact in Tuscaloosa, which is home to the state's major mental health operations.

"Any cut to mental health will be a very difficult blow to endure," said Rep. John Merrill, R-Tuscaloosa. "No community has been as devastated by cuts in mental health as our community of Tuscaloosa County."

The closing of the department's W.D. Partlow Developmental Center late last year and a shift of its functions to community-based providers significantly affected Tuscaloosa's economy, as state employees lost jobs or retired at lower pay.

Late last month, the Department of Mental health notified the State Personnel Department it will cut another 34 positions at Bryce Hospital to reflect a decreasing client base.



The Associated Press

Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley delivers his State of the State address to a combined session of the Alabama Legislature at the historic Capitol in Montgomery Tuesday.



Murray Townsend, president of the ARC of Alabama, a nonprofit agency that serves people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, said proposed cuts could significantly affect community mental health providers. The federal money that mental health providers receive is dependent on state matching dollars — for example, a cut in state funding of \$3 million would reduce federal dollars by \$7 million, a \$10 million total loss.

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“Anything less than level funding for community providers will force many community service providers to close their doors,” Townsend said.

He said if a smaller appropriation cannot be neutralized by cutting extraneous spending, “then Alabama needs to increase revenue so that all citizens of Alabama may enjoy the quality of life they so deserve.”

Bentley said he would not support tax increases and House Minority Leader Craig Ford, D-Gadsden, said Democrats will not propose any.

John Ziegler, mental health department spokesman, was asked about the effect of the governor's proposed budget.

“Like all other agencies, the ADMH is facing extreme budget constraints and we are reviewing all options,” he said.