



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

EDITORIAL: Mental health services rely on adequate funds

Published: Tuesday, February 14, 2012 at 3:30 a.m.

Public education has the backing of the Alabama Education Association. Medicaid reimbursements are of great concern to doctors and nursing homes. Prisons may not have a powerful constituency, but there is the very real threat that a federal judge could force the release of inmates from the overcrowded state prison system — and who, besides those behind bars, wants that to happen?

Who is looking out for people with mental illnesses and intellectual disabilities?

The state Legislature has an immense task ahead of it this session. General Fund revenues for 2013 fiscal year, which starts Oct. 1, are expected to fall by \$367 million, which equates to 22 percent. That's mainly because more than \$300 million in windfalls supporting the General Fund this year will be gone.

Already, the Department of Mental Health has said it will lay off 34 workers at Bryce Hospital, the only remaining residential psychiatric institution operated by the state. Officials cited this year's "unprecedented shortfall" in appropriations. The department had to cut at least \$30 million in spending this year.

Next year may be worse.

Bryce Hospital and other facilities maintained by the Department of Mental Health have cut thousands of jobs in recent years, largely because of a shift to community-based care. That is part of the reason for the current Bryce layoffs, which take effect by March 1.

If not for the shift to less expensive

community-based care, it isn't clear how the state would be able to cover the cost of mental health services for Alabama residents.

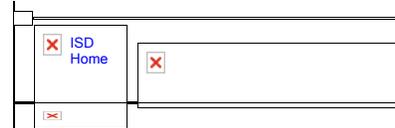
Group homes can provide not just cost savings, but also a better quality of life for people with mental illnesses and intellectual disabilities. That is, if they are properly run and adequately supervised. There are a limited number of group home beds available through state placement, so there's already waiting list.

Unlike institutions such as Bryce and the W.D. Parlow Developmental Center, now closed, group homes are usually tucked away in neighborhoods where they keep a low profile. That's intended and as it should be. But that lower profile also means the level of services — staffing, placements, activities — isn't as obvious.

Local leaders, including the mayor and those in the criminal justice system, are concerned that gaps in care have resulted in many former clients of the Department of Mental Health receiving services that strain local agencies and re-institutionalize them in jails and prisons.

In a news article published Sunday, Tuscaloosa Municipal Court Judge Madelene noted, "With the closing down of mental health facilities in Tuscaloosa, you sometimes end up with people in jail who would be better somewhere else."

Web P



The website you have attempted to access may have been inadvertently redirected to a website that may contain a virus or other malware.

It makes no economic sense, and it certainly is not humane, to lay off staff at Bryce if it only means hiring more prison guards. Community-based care can be a solution if it is adequately funded in the state budget. Copyright © 2012 TuscaloosaNews.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.