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Mental health shake-up will have big impact on Tuscaloosa

Plan would close all mental health facilities outside Tuscaloosa

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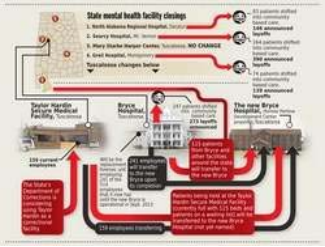

Staff graphic | Anthony Bratina

TUSCALOOSA | Under a sweeping plan announced Wednesday, the Alabama Department of Mental Health will close four of the state's six mental health hospitals and move most patients into community-based care by Sept. 30.

Bryce Hospital and the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center in Tuscaloosa will remain open, but Bryce will be repurposed to house court-committed criminal, or forensic, patients. Those patients are now at Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility, also in Tuscaloosa.

The plan also calls for laying off 948 of 1,555 mental health department employees statewide, including 273 at Bryce. The 607 employees who will be retained will work in Tuscaloosa, either at Bryce, an inpatient psychiatric facility for adults, or the Harper Center, an inpatient psychiatric facility for the elderly.

The new Bryce, under construction on University Boulevard East, will not replace the existing Bryce as originally planned, but instead will become a secure medical facility, replacing Taylor Hardin.

The plan will require shifting the 473 patients in institutions into

community-based care by the target date of Sept. 30.

State Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh announced the plan to department employees and legislators in a series of meetings Wednesday.

“We have looked at every other viable alternative,” she said. “Obviously, the state is facing a dire fiscal situation.”

Tuscaloosa area legislators and government leaders, however, denounced the changes, which follow the department's decision last year to close the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center.

Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox said the plan would cause widespread harm.

“This plan would have a catastrophic impact on mental health consumers in the entire community,” Maddox said. “We know through study after study that there needs to be in place an institutional setting for those who are in acute distress.

“Placing all those needs outside in a community-based setting, you're setting up a situation that's going to be catastrophic for the consumer and the community.”

The mayor said the move amounts to an unfunded mandate by the state, essentially placing onto local governments the responsibility of keeping those with mental

illnesses from harming themselves or others.

“The state is truly doing its best to get out of providing care for our mental health consumers,” Maddox said. “This is a sad, sad day for mental health in Alabama.”

Tuscaloosa County Probate Judge Hardy McCollum, who has had to commit hundreds of people with mental illness to Bryce Hospital, said he was deeply concerned about closing Bryce while leaving no option for institutional care.

“I've already seen the impact of simply cutting back services to mentally ill in this state has caused,” McCollum said. “There are more people in jails and a lot of folks on the street, and folks simply falling through the cracks with our current system.”

Members of the Tuscaloosa County legislative delegation said they were stunned by the news.

“I'm shocked and disappointed,” said Rep. Alan Harper, R-Aliceville. “As I said, God bless our families and consumers.”

“This is devastating to our communities,” said Rep. John Merrill, R-Tuscaloosa.

Rep. Chris England, D-

Tuscaloosa, told Baugh that he does not believe enough accommodations will be in place by Sept. 30 to handle the transition of hundreds of patients to community-based care.

“We will not be prepared,” England said.

“We're struggling with a number of providers who said they have red tape and have a difficult time transitioning (Partlow patients),” he said.

“I'm very skeptical how this move will actually deal with the needs of people by not having facilities in the state. On paper it sounds like a good plan, but it also could be a colossal failure.”

Not everyone said closing the facilities would be a mistake.

Closing state facilities except those that serve the forensic population is a move that other states have made, said James Tucker, associate director for the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, which advocates community-based care for people with disabilities, including those with mental illnesses.

Tucker said Baugh has been faced with difficult decisions, including whether to cut services to the more than 100,000 people in community-based care, or cut state-run mental health hospitals.

“In the big picture, she is absolutely making the right decision,” Tucker said. “You can't put 100,000 people at risk.”

But in order for state facilities to close, the appropriate support must be in place in the community, and that does not exist now, Tucker said. Tucker estimated it would take a minimum of six to 12 months for community services to be established for people now in state facilities.

Jim Reddoch, a former director of both Bryce Hospital and Taylor Hardin, and former deputy commissioner for the Department of Mental Health, said similar moves in other states have not always worked out for the best.

“Some think that the community is the best place for everyone, if you can put enough support services with them, but that is very expensive,” said Reddoch, executive director of Indian Rivers Mental Health Center in Tuscaloosa. “If we are looking at

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saving money due to the budget situation that we are in, I'm not sure how well that will work."

In some states that have closed all state-run mental health facilities, the result has been an increase in the homeless population and the jail population, Reddoch said.

"I think that anywhere you make that kind of a move, that is a concern," Reddoch said. "The issue is whether we can address the concern well enough to keep it from happening."

Dr. Phillip K. Bobo, medical director for the Tuscaloosa County Jail, said the plan would add to an already stressed jail population and could have other unforeseen consequences for the Tuscaloosa area.

"We have a substantial number of former and current Bryce patients already," he said. "If they take all Bryce patients...and put them in a community setting, then most are going to end up in jail."

Tuscaloosa County Sheriff Ted Sexton said the jail already is between 150 and 200 inmates over capacity. He estimated that about 40 percent of the jail's average of 700 inmates receive some form of mental health assistance, ranging from psychotropic drugs to mental health checks.

"This appears to be another incident in which the state has not reached out to those responsible for protecting the community from those who are mentally incompetent," Sexton said. "I'd very much like to meet with them and see the plan before we have Tuscaloosa County involved in an episode of 'Criminal Minds.' "

Bobo questioned how those who need immediate mental health care are expected to get it outside of a jail or criminal detainment facility.

"I don't see how you can shift Bryce patients from in-patients to out-patients," Bobo said. "Clearly, there are people who need to be institutionalized. And where are you going to send people who need to be stabilized? It's an ill-thought out plan."

In his proposed General Fund budget for the 2012-13 fiscal year, Gov. Robert Bentley recommended a General Fund appropriation to the Department of Mental Health of $104.6 million, a cut of $12 million. That assumes no proration in this year's remaining budget or a further legislative cut.

Bentley spokeswoman Jennifer Ardis said the governor supports Baugh's plan to close four facilities and shift most patients into community-based care.

Baugh said state mental health facilities do not get federal dollars but that community-based patients qualify for Medicaid. The state can leverage its state dollars to secure federal dollars, she said. Without the plan the state could lose $76 million in federal aid, Baugh said.

Also, if the state continued to operate the hospitals, she said 20,640 community-based patients would lose services.

"Many small providers will go out of business with the loss of thousands of jobs," Baugh said.

"We have to plan a worst-case scenario," she said.

The 207 employees at the Harper Geriatric Center do not face layoffs, but of the 514 positions at Bryce Hospital, 273 would be eliminated under the plan. The 241 remaining Bryce employees and the 159 employees at Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility would transfer to the new Bryce, which is scheduled to open in May 2013. It will be renamed and will serve as the state's forensic mental health facility for court-

committed defendants and criminals.

The plan provides for temporarily using the admission unit at the existing Bryce to house 115 forensic patients now at Bryce and other state mental health facilities who now have ground privileges. Baugh said the admission unit is a secure unit.

Taylor Hardin houses another 115 forensic patients, the facility's capacity, who do not have ground privileges.

Once the new hospital opens, all forensic patients at Bryce and Taylor Hardin will move there, said mental health department spokesman Tony Thompson.

Another 247 residents now at Bryce, which is adjacent to the University of Alabama campus, will be transferred to community-based care.

The plan also calls for closing Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery, which has 139 employees; North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur, which employs 146; and Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon, which employs 390. All jobs would be eliminated, although some are eligible for retirement.

Baugh said some mental health employees will qualify for jobs at newly created mental health community homes operated by state-regulated boards.

Because the mental health department will have fewer hospitals, the central office will be reorganized and could face layoffs, Baugh said.

The Department of Corrections is considering using Taylor Hardin and the North Alabama Regional Hospital as prisons, spokesman Brian Corbett said.

Baugh said the Decatur facility could be used for inmates with major medical needs.

The original Bryce Hospital will cease to exist as a mental health treatment facility after 151 years and will remain an office building and museum. The University of Alabama acquired the Bryce campus in a deal worked out with the mental health department more than two years ago, but will not take possession of the property until the new Bryce opens. Bentley will name the new hospital, which is being built on the former Partlow campus.

The department's plan follows its decision last year to close Partlow, which resulted in the loss of about 450 jobs through attrition, retirement or layoffs.

Until about 10 years ago, the Department of Mental Health had 10 facilities and thousands of employees.

Baugh said it costs taxpayers about $140,000 to care for a mental health patient in a facility, but about $50,000 to $60,000 in a community-based facility.

Baugh said the plan includes opening 16-bed crisis mental health centers in strategic regions of the state that should alleviate the need to house some patients with mental illnesses in jails. She said the department would partner with local hospitals to provide temporary treatment.

“If we move to community facilities, we will be able to leverage Medicaid federal dollars that we are unable to do right now,” she said. “I see this as an opportunity to maximize General Fund taxpayer dollars for the greater benefit of people who need our services.

“This will not be an unfunded mandate,” she told legislators.

Baugh said if her plan isn't implemented, she will have greater operating costs and probably will be subject to federal intervention.

“It does represent job loss for state employees,” Baugh told House members. “It's not something I'm excited about doing. If we don't implement this plan the consequences could be significant.”