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.

Facility closings, budget cuts part of national trend

By Lydia Seabol Avant
Staff Writer
Published: Thursday, February 16, 2012 at 3:30 a.m.

File | The Associated Press
Searcy Hospital state mental institution in Mount Vernon, Ala., is among the facilities the state is looking to close.

Closing state mental hospitals and trimming state dollars is not unique to Alabama. It's part of a nationwide trend that is an effect of the current recession, said Robert W. Glover, executive director of the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors.

“Each year, state budget cuts have taken a big hit,” Glover said.

About $36.7 billion is spent on public mental health every year in the U.S., serving 6.8 million people annually. But because of decreased funding in most states, the mental health system nationwide has seen $3.4 billion in cuts since 2009, according to the national State Mental Health Association.

Reducing administrative costs is the top move that states do when cutting mental health spending, followed by hiring freezes and reducing community providers, the State Mental Health Association found.

About 45 percent of states making cuts closed state hospital units or wards, according to a 2010 study by the State Mental Health Association. In the past two years, 3,930 state psychiatric hospital beds have been eliminated. That's more than 8 percent of the total number in the nation.

Those patients are usually put into community-based care. But too often, funding cuts are made in community care.

It's a bad time to be cutting mental health dollars, Glover said.

“One of the worst times to be taking cuts like this is when the economy is bad and our services are needed the most,” he said.

Too often, an economic recession corresponds with increased levels of joblessness, home foreclosures, depression, violence and suicide attempts, Glover said.

On average, most states spend about 75 percent of their mental health dollars on community-based care and 25 percent on state-run psychiatric hospitals. Alabama, by contrast, spends about 50 percent of its mental health funding on state hospitals. That will change as the hospitals are closed, a move announced Wednesday by the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

Some states, like Rhode Island, have closed all of their state-run hospitals. That doesn't mean there are no acute-care, short-term beds for the mentally ill. Often, these beds are offered through private contracts, sometimes in private facilities or even in county hospitals.

“You just can't go without any beds at all,” Glover said.

Providing psychiatric beds in the community takes planning to ensure there are appropriate supports available, he added, with consideration of an individual's specific needs. That takes time and good leadership.

“These are not easy things, to close hospitals,” Glover said. “It takes a while, with long-term planning. You cannot close a hospital and open new community programs without some overlap funding.

“It is a major task.”

Reach Lydia Seabol Avant at 205-722-0222 or lydia.seabolavant@tuscaloosanews.com.

Copyright © 2012 TuscaloosaNews.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.