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EDITORIAL: State mental health plan is too dangerous

Published: Thursday, February 16, 2012 at 3:30 a.m.

So here's the plan, as we understand it: Move dangerously mental ill inmates to a high-profile spot in Alberta, open a state prison on the edge of downtown Tuscaloosa just off Jack Warner Parkway and release all the current residents at Bryce Hospital and the state's other residential psychiatric institutions into the community.

That's it in a nutshell.

On Wednesday, Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh unveiled a radical plan to upend the department and lay off nearly 1,000 employees statewide. Baugh wasn't at all clear about what would happen short-term with the inmates at Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility who have been convicted of violent crimes or are awaiting trial. Her plan is to put them in the facility that was to be a new state psychiatric hospital, now under construction in Alberta. A press release from her department seemed to indicate that, in the meantime, they would be placed in the old Bryce Hospital. We certainly hope that isn't correct.

Let's be clear. This isn't about what is best for people with mental illnesses and their families. This isn't about what is best for neighborhoods and cities. This is about trying to balance the state's budget without raising taxes.

It overturns years of study for reshaping the state's system of mental health and disability services. That plan, developed under Gov. Bob Riley, was to move as many people as possible out of state institutions and into group homes. Over and over, state officials said the plan wasn't about saving money; it was about improving the quality of life for the clients they serve.

While we shared some of the reservations expressed by Mayor Walt Maddox, city council members and local legislators — that the state's patients would become a local burden — overall that plan made sense. Was it all a lie?

No. For many people at Bryce Hospital, Partlow Developmental Center and similar facilities across the state, it was the right move. Group homes offer them a supportive environment that isn't cut off from society, where they can make choices, often hold jobs and perhaps transition to life on their own. And it did save the taxpayers money.

Better understanding of mental illness and new medications have made the trend to de-institutionalization possible. Still, some portion of the population can't function well in group homes. For them, the shift out of state psychiatric facilities has too often put them on the streets, where they are more likely to be victims of crime, suffer injuries or wind up in jail.

The human toll of this is beyond measure, but local government officials also see it impact their budgets. About 40 percent of inmates in the Tuscaloosa County Jail are on psychiatric medications. DCH Regional Medical Center sees its emergency room visits increase. Local social service agencies see more need.

This plan is tragic, inhumane and dangerous.

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