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## Deadline for transferring mental health patients may be delayed

**Transfer may not be complete by Sept. 30, Bentley says**

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Published: Friday, February 17, 2012 at 3:30 a.m.

MONTGOMERY | A Sept. 30 deadline for transferring hundreds of patients from mental health institutions into community-based care will be extended if adequate treatment settings are not in place by then, Gov. Robert Bentley said Thursday.



Staff file photo

Speaking at an impromptu news conference at the State House, Bentley said the patients would be his priority under a cost-cutting plan released Wednesday by the Alabama Department of Mental Health. The plan entails closing by Sept. 30 four of the six state institutions where patients with mental illness reside.

A Sept. 30 deadline for transferring hundreds of patients from mental health institutions into community-based care will be extended if adequate treatment settings are not in place by then, Gov. Robert Bentley said Thursday.

"About the deadline of Sept. 30, that is not a hard and fast deadline," Bentley said. "We cannot transfer mentally ill patients out into the community until we have a good network of community services for those patients.

"We are going to make sure those are in place before we transfer people into the communities."

Bentley said layoffs still would occur, once residents are moved and staffing needs change.

The department devised the cost-cutting plan, which was announced by State Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh, in anticipation of steep cuts in the state General Fund budget for the 2012-2013 fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1.

In addition to closing the four mental health facilities — North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur, Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon, Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery and Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa — the department's plan calls for laying off 948 employees, including 273 at Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa.

Most of the department's remaining employees would work at two inpatient facilities, Bryce and the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center, which also is in Tuscaloosa.

Bryce will close, however, when a new facility opens on University Boulevard. The department originally intended the facility to replace Bryce, but now it will replace Taylor Hardin, which houses court-committed patients who are declared incompetent or found not guilty by reason of insanity or mental defect. The new facility is slated to open in May 2013. Until then, Taylor Hardin will remain open. Taylor Hardin's 159 employees will transfer to the new facility, along with 241 employees now at Bryce. The Harper Center's 207 employees would be retained.



In announcing the department's plan, Baugh also said her priority, even with the proposed deadline, would be the well-being and adequate placement of mental health consumers.

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Nevertheless, mental health department spokesman Tony Thompson said the department would evaluate the plan in light of Bentley's comments.

"As we continue to develop our plan for transformation and transition, we are assessing the financial implications of possible delays," Thompson said. "We will continue to factor all scenarios and their impact to both individuals and finances."

State Rep. Alan Harper, R-Aliceville, said the department's Sept. 30 deadline was unrealistic.

Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa, said he does not believe the department will be able to find community treatment for all current mental health consumers.

"They don't have the money to develop a community-care network that will adequately take care of them in the community," England said. "If it hasn't happened by now, it will never happen after all these years."

This is the second time Bentley has postponed a deadline established by Baugh.

Last year, he extended by two months the Sept. 30 deadline Baugh had set to close the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in Tuscaloosa and move its residents into community settings.

Bentley reset the Partlow deadline to Nov. 30, but the facility ultimately remained open until Dec. 28, when the last of its residents was moved to a community home.