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## Commissioner cancels meeting to discuss mental health changes

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TUSCALOOSA | Alabama Department of Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh was a no-show for Friday's arranged meeting with Tuscaloosa's state and local leaders to discuss her proposal to close all but two of the state's mental health facilities.



Staff file photo

Alabama Department of Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh was a no-show for an arranged meeting with Tuscaloosa's state and local leaders to discuss her proposal to close all but two of the state's mental health facilities.

Tony Thompson, executive assistant to the commissioner of mental health, said the meeting was canceled when Baugh learned that the meeting she had called with Mayor Walt Maddox and three other local leaders had grown to more than 10 members of the Legislature and other local officials.

Baugh believed the size of the group would be an obstacle to worthwhile discussion, Thompson said.

"She didn't feel that the meeting would be productive," Thompson said, noting that Baugh offered to reschedule with Maddox's office, but as of 5 p.m. the department had yet to hear back from the mayor.

Thompson confirmed that Baugh was in Tuscaloosa when she called about 10 minutes before the meeting's 2 p.m. start to inform Maddox that she would not be attending.

At the time, Maddox said he was given no reason for Baugh's absence when he announced the meeting's cancellation to those who had come seeking more information regarding the massive realignment of the state's mental health facilities.

"The story hasn't changed any at all. I wish it had," said Sen. Gerald Allen, R-Tuscaloosa. "We're very disappointed the commissioner chose to cancel at such a late (hour) like this."

"We were very anxious to hear what was going on," said Rep. John Merrill, R-Tuscaloosa. "(This plan) is a very heavy burden for our ... community."

Baugh's plan, announced Wednesday, calls for the closure of four of the state's six mental health hospitals and the transition of about 470 patients in those institutions to community-based care by Sept. 30, although Gov. Robert Bentley said Thursday that deadline could be extended.

In Tuscaloosa, the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility will close and be offered to the state corrections department for a possible prison, while Bryce Hospital and the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center will remain open.

A new facility being built on University Boulevard to replace Bryce, an inpatient psychiatric facility for adults, will be repurposed to replace Taylor Hardin, which



houses court-committed criminal — or forensic — patients. The existing Bryce will close after the new facility opens.

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The plan also calls for layoffs of 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 the Bryce replacement facility or the Harper Center, an inpatient psychiatric facility for the elderly.

Local government officials and several Tuscaloosa-area legislators immediately objected to the plan, saying that it would strain local law enforcement and the already overcrowded Tuscaloosa County Jail, and that it would be impractical to eliminate all institutional care for people with mental illness.

Probate Judge Hardy McCollum said the plan was one more step the state is taking to relinquish its responsibility to oversee the care of mentally ill patients. Last year, the Department of Mental Health closed the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in Tuscaloosa. It was the state's only residential facility for people with developmental disabilities.

That decision and the more extensive mental health cuts announced Wednesday were in response to drastic cuts that are expected in the state General Fund budget for the 2012-2013 fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1.

Merrill and Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa, agreed that the majority of legislators have a limited understanding of the importance of mental health facilities and the impact closing them would have on the communities in which they operate.

For that reason, and because of the expected savings in the General Fund, they expect Baugh's plan will not face much opposition in the Legislature.

The savings may look good at first, but the changes could wind up costing the state and local governments more in the long run, England said.

The mental health department should look at other options before going forward with the plan, he said.

"I think this should be the last option after all the others are explored," he said.

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