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Prison chief, Bentley say mental health plan still in early stages

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MONTGOMERY | A plan to convert mental health facilities in Tuscaloosa and Decatur into state prisons is in the very earliest stages.

"It's just something we're looking at," Gov. Robert Bentley said Friday.

Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh last week announced that four of the six remaining mental health centers in the state will close, including the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa.



Michelle Lepianka Carter | Tuscaloosa News
Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa serves as a prison for court-committed criminal defendants.



Baugh said community-based mental health services will be expanded to accommodate the shift of patients into community treatment. Only the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Facility and the replacement for Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa will remain open.

She set a deadline of Sept. 30 to close the centers and move patients, but the governor said the centers won't close until the current patients are moved into the community.

As part of the plan, Baugh said Taylor Hardin and the North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur might be turned over to the Department of Corrections for use as prisons.

Prison Commissioner Kim Thomas said any decision to convert a mental health hospital into a prison would depend on several factors, including need and cost.

"It did spark my interest," Thomas said. "I want to see the facilities."

For all practical purposes, the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility serves as a prison for court-committed criminal defendants.

Baugh suggested that Decatur hospital could become a hospital for inmates with major medical problems, which Thomas said is needed.

Thomas said the environments of the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Corrections are different and he isn't sure whether the facilities could be easily transformed to meet system needs.

Thomas said the funding also might be a problem. "It's really difficult not knowing the fate of the 2013 budget," he said. Legislators are debating Bentley's proposed General Fund budget, which contains up to 25 percent cuts for some agencies.

At a budget committee hearing last week, Thomas briefed legislators on his agency's finances, which can't right now can't support adding two new prison facilities.

"We don't want to get ahead of ourselves," he said.

Baugh's plan is to move court-committed defendants now living at Taylor Hardin and those from other mental health centers to the new mental health hospital being built in Tuscaloosa, which will replace Bryce Hospital.

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The new hospital, scheduled to open in May 2013, has yet to be named.

Baugh spokesman Tony Thompson said the replacement hospital will be designed to securely house court-ordered criminal defendants.

The hospital will accept 115 patients from Taylor Hardin and another 115 court-ordered criminal defendants living in other mental health facilities.

"We're looking at whether we have to do any redesign," Thompson said Friday.

Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox said it's too early to comment about the potential for Taylor Hardin's conversion to a state prison.

"At this point, it is hard to have an opinion because there is so much uncertainty and confusion out of Montgomery," Maddox said.

"The more this moves forward, the more evident it becomes that this decision-making process is haphazard and fraught with problems."

Baugh's plan includes closing four mental health facilities and laying off 948 mental health department employees. In Tuscaloosa, nearly 280 employees at Bryce would lose their jobs when the state moves from hospital-based mental health service to community-based care.

Tuscaloosa legislators were skeptical about the potential for transforming Taylor Hardin into a prison.

"Our community has been devastated by the loss of mental health jobs with Partlow (Developmental Center) being closed last year," said Rep. John Merrill, R-Tuscaloosa. "We don't need to overburden Tuscaloosa County because of the budget."

"I hope before the department puts a prison in Tuscaloosa, they would discuss it with us," said Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa.