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Mental health advocates rally against funding cuts

By Dana Beyerle

Montgomery Bureau

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MONTGOMERY | Joe Farley of Demopolis spoke Wednesday at the annual mental health and disability day rally at the Alabama State House to make a plea for funding for community mental health care, which is threatened by declining state revenues.

Farley's testimonial was one of several given by men and women with intellectual disabilities and addictions who have been helped by services provided in their communities by the Alabama Department of Mental Health. The department, along with other agencies funded by the General Fund, is facing drastic budget cuts next fiscal year.

Farley, 24, said that by the time he was 10 he had lived in 12 different foster homes. He said he was abused and eventually used drugs and alcohol.

He told his story to at least 300 people who attended the rally, speaking about his successful transition away from being an abused, drug-influenced child who was also bipolar.

"Mental health services saved my life," Farley said.

Farley and his brother, Jacob King, 23, work for an event security company at University of Alabama football games.

"I ate Thanksgiving supper with (Alabama head coach) Nick Saban," said Farley, an Alabama fan. "He's not intense when he's not on the job."

"I'm living my dream," Farley said. "I'm part of a family."

Mary Price, 30, who lives at the Phoenix House, a state-supported residential rehabilitation facility in Tuscaloosa, said she is a recovered alcoholic and drug user and now has a job.

"Drugs took away my relationship with my 5-year-old son," she said. "I recovered. Combined with the power of God and their help, I remain sober one year today."

Ronnie Colvin works at the Phoenix House and is president of the Tuscaloosa chapter of FORMLL, Friends of Recovery in Morgan, Madison, Lawrence, Limestone, Cullman and Randolph counties. It is an advocacy group that works to eliminate barriers to addiction recovery.

Colvin pointed out the savings to taxpayers. He said community-provided services are cheaper than institutions and FORMLL clients also work and pay taxes.

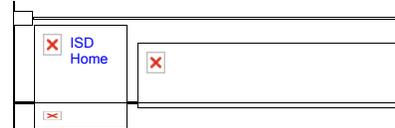
"People do better in communities," he said.



The Associated Press

Mental health advocates, including Jacob King, front left, and Joe Farley, right, rally outside the Alabama State House in Montgomery Wednesday. Hundreds of advocates and individuals receiving mental health services gathered to raise awareness of key issues and to send a message to lawmakers to not cut mental health funding.

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The Arc of Alabama, a support and advocacy group for the intellectually and developmentally disabled, organized the rally to coincide with Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh's presentation to the joint legislative budget committee hearing later in the day.

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"We're here to support it," King said of Baugh's plan to reorganize mental health services. The plan calls for closing four of the state's six mental health institutions and diverting their operating revenue to community-based services provided to tens of thousands of consumers.

"The support today by the people we serve is incredible," Baugh said. "More importantly, the recovery I see you show us on a daily basis is testimony to what we do every day."

She said the mental health budget could be cut 25 percent but that she hopes for a less drastic 10 percent reduction or even less. A 25 percent cut would eliminate community services to at least 20,000 people and hundreds with intellectual disabilities, she said.

"We cannot cut community services," Baugh said.

She said that closing most of the state-run mental health facilities, which most other states have done, and concentrating on community care is a historic step for mental health consumers.

Consumers at the rally expressed fear that mental health budget cuts will endanger their community services. Baugh said that could happen if her plan is rejected and the state does not find more funding.

Baugh has set a Sept. 30 target date to close North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur, Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon, the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa and Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery.

But the closures may be postponed until consumers in the facilities have been transferred to community-based care.

Remaining open will be the new mental health hospital being built in Tuscaloosa to replace Bryce Hospital and the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Center also in Tuscaloosa.