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LETTER: Psychiatric hospital closure needs to stop

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Dear Editor: Thank you for your coverage on Alabama's plan to close the state's psychiatric hospitals to all but criminal and geriatric patients ("Mental health services rely on adequate funds," Feb. 17). The Treatment Advocacy Center is the only national nonprofit that focuses on the treatment needs of this population, and we find this move horrifying.

Deinstitutionalization already has reduced America's psychiatric bed population by 90 percent and triggered a dramatic upsurge in homelessness, law enforcement calls involving mental illness, incarceration of the mentally ill, and rare but deadly incidents involving untreated mental illness.

The fact that Alabama officials seem to believe they can avoid the costs associated with mental illness — by not treating the state's most ill citizens — is astounding.

Mentally ill individuals who are stable can access and benefit from community services. State hospitals exist to serve the highly vulnerable population of people who are not able to seek or benefit from outpatient services — people so ill they don't know they need help, people in acute psychiatric crisis who cannot distinguish delusion from reality, and people who suffer treatment-resistant mental illnesses that make them chronically unstable.

Closure of these hospitals will ultimately cost the state more — in money and lives. It needs to be stopped.

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