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First steps taken toward Tuscaloosa County mental health court

Therapist and case manager to evaluate Tuscaloosa County Jail inmates

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TUSCALOOSA | Indian Rivers Mental Health

Center soon will hire a therapist and a case manager to evaluate Tuscaloosa County Jail inmates and determine the correct course of action for offenders with mental illnesses.

Tuscaloosa County Circuit Court Judge Brad Almond said Friday that the hirings will be the first step toward establishing a mental health court, which would redirect people with mental illness from the judicial system to the health care system.

A mental health court would also ease the strain on an overburdened court system and overpopulated county jails and state prisons, said Almond, who would act as the mental health court judge.

The therapist and case manager would begin reviewing current jail inmates who have a history with the mental health facility, Almond said during a meeting of the Crisis Intervention Committee of the Community Health Task Force.

The therapist and case manager would monitor new inmates soon after jail booking. Someone sent to mental health court could be ordered to make frequent court appearances and receive therapy, Almond said.

"We would review their case as often as necessary. We would see how they're doing on their medication, those kinds of things," Almond said.

No one who commits a serious felony or violent crime would be referred to mental health court. Crimes by people who suffer from a mental illness are often misdemeanors, Almond said.

For instance, a man who self-medicates with drugs and alcohol could be arrested for public intoxication. A homeless woman who steals her dinner could be thrown in jail for theft.

For these less serious crimes, the person's charge could be set aside and dropped once they complete all of the court's requirements. A more serious crime could result in a permanent charge and a sentence served not in jail, but under strict supervision by the court and case managers.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," said committee member Judy Hayes, who retired from the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services and has been a counselor for people with mental illnesses. "So many of the mentally ill do not belong in jail. They belong in treatment. This way, someone can do an assessment and determine the appropriate place for them."

Committee members spoke Friday about working with local police departments to train officers, or even one officer per shift, to recognize signs of mental illness and know how best to handle the case of a mentally ill suspect.

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