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Mental health system changing

Treatment today centering more on community

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TUSCALOOSA | Over the past several years, Alabama has dramatically revamped its mental health system, closing most of its state-run



Photo provided by Alabama Department of Mental Health

Gov. Robert Bentley swears in Jim Reddoch as commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health. Reddoch, who spoke Tuesday evening at a town hall on mental health, sponsored by the University of Alabama's Honors College, said the future of treating people with mental illnesses will continue to be at the community level.

mental health hospitals while emphasizing more community-based treatment facilities.

It's a move that has encountered much opposition, but it is one that is working, said Jim Reddoch, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

Reddoch, who spoke Tuesday evening at a town hall on mental health, sponsored by the University of Alabama's Honors College, said the future of treating people with mental illnesses will continue to be at the community level.

Three things are driving that

effort — money, litigation and "it is the right thing to do," said Reddoch, who spent eight years as the administrator at Bryce Hospital and nine years heading Taylor Hardin Secure Mental Facility, both of which are in Tuscaloosa.

When Bryce started to downsize the number of psychiatric patients living at the hospital in the 1990s, the clinical staff claimed the number could not be reduced further, he said, but they were wrong.

People were treated and successfully discharged just as those treated for other health problems are discharged from hospitals like DCH Medical Center, he said.

They are able to return to their families or live independently in their communities. Those still needing some help are living in community group homes.

"If you had an opportunity to be at Bryce or be living in your home community and there is a support system to make it happen, then we should try to do it," he said.

Federal laws making it illegal to discriminate against people with disabilities, including mental health problems, and ensuing lawsuits have ended the days when state courts committed people to psychiatric facilities and then forgot about them, Reddoch said.

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Treatment and sometimes continued medication after discharge allow those with mental illnesses to lead normal lives. Mental illnesses can be treated just like diabetes and high blood pressure, he said.

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Government budget cutbacks, including the loss of more than \$40 million in the Department of Mental Health's budget in recent years, also is a factor that led to the reduction of facilities and the embracing of community-based treatment.

At its peak, Alabama once had 11 mental health hospitals and inpatient facilities. It now has four.

"Where did all the people go when we closed a hospital?" Reddoch asked. "It is not like we were throwing 300 people out on the streets."

They were treated and discharged just like before to return to their home communities.

Both Reddoch and R. Clay Shealy, director of UA's Psychology Clinic, said too often people stigmatize those with mental illnesses.

Shealy said people with mental illnesses do not commit crimes any more than the rest of the population, and if anything, they are more apt to be victims of crime.

He said about 25 percent of the population will experience some form of mental health issue annually, including depression and substance abuse. But 60 percent of those people won't get treatment.

Nine percent of the population will deal with substance abuse with 90 percent of them not getting treatment, Shealy said. And among college students, 30 percent will experience depression, anxiety or other problems that affect their ability to function normally, but 60 percent of them will not seek treatment.

Shealy said people should not isolate those exhibiting a mental health problem, but should embrace them so they don't feel alienated.

"Reach out to the neighbor who seems a little odd rather than alienate them," he said.

That support will help in their recovery, he said.