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EDITORIAL: Mental health plans should be 'on hold'

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The plan for mental health care in Alabama lacks a timeline, a budget or details on what is required to accomplish its goal of moving clients to community-based care. Yet the Governor's Office is adamant that its plan is not "on hold."

Whatever you call it, it is another signal that Gov. Robert Bentley's administration is not well practiced at thinking through plans before announcing them, or gaining the political support necessary for accomplishing its goals.

A month ago, state Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh announced sweeping changes that would require four of the state's mental health hospitals to close, and nearly 1,000 workers to be laid off by Sept. 30.

This week, Gov. Robert Bentley said, "Not so fast."

That's good news, because mental health professionals here and across the nation say it is impractical to develop the necessary support services in counties across the state in seven months.

Local government officials have predicted many of those leaving Bryce and other state psychiatric facilities would end up on the street, in general care hospitals or in jail.

Community-based care is widely recognized as a better long-term option for people with mental illness, and it can be less expensive for taxpayers. But it requires more group homes and more support for crisis care.

All that is costly in the short term, as the state ramps up a community-based system capable of handling more clients. There is a necessary overlap while some patients remain in hospitals while other options are developed.

The dilemma for the Department of Mental Health is that it had planned to pay for more community-based care with the savings from closing its institutions. But the state can't close its institutions before it invests in a bigger community network.

How can the Mental Health Department cover this short-term problem? We have a suggestion.

The Department of Mental Health is one of the largest landowners in Tuscaloosa County. Through the Mental Health Board, it owns 75 parcels of property valued at more than \$40 million.

That doesn't include the Bryce Hospital property already sold to the University of Alabama. It does include water-front property on Lake Tuscaloosa, valuable farmland and potential industrial and commercial sites. Among those is a land adjacent to University Mall. Much of this land was acquired decades ago when the department was expected to generate much of its own income and even grow food for its hospital cafeterias.

Gov. Bentley should immediately direct the Mental Health Department to assess the need for each of its land-holdings in Tuscaloosa County. Sale of some of these assets could fund transition to community-based care and put more land on the tax rolls. There's no need to wait on that plan.

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