

Stakeholders consider option for mental health care

Fear of unknown, details of transition main concerns at meeting with patients, providers, officials

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MONTGOMERY | Alabama Department of Mental Health officials have been meeting with stakeholders to tell them of plans to shift mental illness services from state hospitals into communities and to ask about their needs.

At Monday's meeting in Montgomery for central and east-Alabama counties, stakeholders included law enforcement officials, mental health providers, mental health patients and legislators.

Their concerns mostly were fears of the unknown and how the transition from state hospitals to community services will work.

One man who said he was bipolar and schizophrenic said he was concerned whether the department will have crisis beds should he need one.

Autauga County Sheriff James "Herbie" Johnson wanted to know if the plan will alleviate the need to assign two deputies out of a shift of only five or six deputies to transport someone to Tuscaloosa for evaluation.

Tammy Peacock, associate commissioner of the Division of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, said the plan envisions mobile teams and local places to take patients. "Everybody is going to have to work out details with everyone," Peacock said.

One woman commended department officials for moving patient care away from institutions and into communities near patient homes if possible.

State Rep. Pebblin Warren, D-Tuskegee, decried the lack of state funding for the mentally ill, which she said as a state legislator she accepted some of the blame.

"We are not putting money into mental health that needs to be in mental health," she said.

Lois Herndon, vice president of the Montgomery chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, expressed what many in the meeting of about 75 people might have felt.



File | the Associated Press

Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh, left, speaks on the statehouse steps in Montgomery during a rally on Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Day on March 8. Baugh says she wants to shift most mental illness services into the community because the department cannot afford to continue to operate six mental illness hospitals.



“We’re really not sure what the plan is,” Herndon said. “We’re all trying to understand.”

Stakeholders broke into groups to discuss responses sought by Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh as she completes a plan to provide mental illness treatment in communities.

Baugh said she wants input by the end of this month so she can present a plan to Gov. Robert Bentley.

“We’re going to be synthesizing and gathering the final data from all regional meetings and putting it out,” Baugh said. “The sooner we can have the final plan in place the better.”

Mental Health officials have held three regional meetings and another is scheduled for Friday in Jefferson County.

Baugh said she wants to shift most mental illness services into the community because the department cannot afford to continue to operate six mental illness hospitals. Her plan calls for closing four of six state hospitals.

The department has been closing mental health facilities since the mid-1990s. Last year the department closed its last center for the intellectually disabled, the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in Tuscaloosa.

Baugh said community-based treatment will allow the department to use state appropriations to leverage federal Medicaid dollars. Mental hospitals are totally state funded.

Part of the overall plan was to build a new mental illness hospital to replace the aging Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa. The use for the new Bryce shifted into a controversial plan to use it as a secure medical facility for court-committed criminal defendants.

Bentley temporarily halted construction of the replacement Bryce Hospital, and Baugh said the governor is “reassessing whether to reallocate those resources to the community.”

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