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## Mentally ill crowding jails, officials say

### Mental health court touted as a solution

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TUSCALOOSA | About 40 percent of the inmates at the Tuscaloosa County Jail receive some form of psychiatric care, including, in some cases, psychotropic drugs, according to the Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Office.

Having a mental health court would help alleviate overcrowding at the jail and get people with mental illness the help they need, Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Ron Abernathy told the County Commission on Wednesday. The jail now houses about 630 inmates, which is over the jail's 540-inmate capacity, he said.

"The problem is, someone (with mental illness) gets off their meds and a family member doesn't know what to do, so they call the Sheriff's Office," Abernathy said. "The (person) may end up in the jail 30 to 60 days or even six months for a \$300 misdemeanor most people would get out on in a day."

According to a grand jury report in March, the county jail is understaffed, with a ratio of one detention officer to 52 inmates. There is also a "drastic" need for a separate facility for mental health inmates, the report said.

There is a missing link, Abernathy said, because there needs to be case management to help get the people with mental illness who have been charged with minor crimes out of the jail and into community care.

"The jail is the worst place for someone with mental illness," he said.

Abernathy, circuit court judges and representatives of Indian Rivers Mental Health Center and Maude Whatley Health Services asked the County Commission to pay \$80,000 a year to add a clinical therapist and a case manager to the existing medical staff at the jail. The therapist and case manager would meet with inmates and determine if there is existing mental illness that would make them eligible for going through a mental health court, instead of the traditional court system.

Under their proposal, the mental health court would allow a conditional release of patients, dependent on their involvement in continued treatment through Indian Rivers Mental Health Center. An inmate would be assigned to a case worker generally for between six to 12 months, or until they "graduate" from the program.

The county would save about \$365,000 per year by reducing the jail population by 25-50 inmates, Abernathy said.

Hardy McCollum, probate judge and County Commission chairman, said something needed to be done, but that the jail overcrowding was the result of the state pulling back its mental health funding and putting more people in community care, instead of state institutions like Bryce Hospital. McCollum said many of the inmates in the jail belong at Bryce.

"The state of Alabama has not met its responsibility nor its obligation to the mentally ill in this state," said McCollum, who commits people to Bryce as part of his role as



probate judge.

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"I deal with them virtually every day, people who don't need to be anywhere but a hospital setting, because group homes can't deal with them," McCollum said.

But Circuit Judge Brad Almond said that there is a wide spectrum of people with mental illness and that many of the people in the jail for minor offenses can be stabilized and lead productive lives in the community.

Commissioner Reginald Murray said he supported the idea of a mental health court but wanted to ensure the long-term stability of people in the program so that they do not end up back in the jail.

The system is not going to be fail proof, said Jim Reddoch, executive director of Indian Rivers. Some may end up back in jail, but that would be better than not having a mental health court at all, he said.

"Is it a 100 percent guarantee, of course not," Reddoch said. "But, hopefully, they will continue under Indian Rivers care."

Indian Rivers Mental Health Center takes care of about 6,500 people with mental illness in West Alabama. Many of those people have similarities to those with mental illness in the jail, he said.

"They just need help to get out of jail and stay in the community, and we think we can do a good job with that," Reddoch said.

Commissioner Don Wallace said he wanted more detailed information on how much money the county might save before making any decisions.

The commission will take up the request for funding at its next meeting, at 9 a.m. May 2.

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