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## Commission denies funding request for mental health court

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TUSCALOOSA | The Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Office's effort to reduce the number of inmates with mental illnesses in the county jail hit a roadblock on Wednesday when the County Commission voted down a funding request of \$10,000.



Robert Sutton / Tuscaloosa news

The Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Office is trying to reduce the number of inmates with mental illness in the jail by creating a mental health court. But, the Tuscaloosa County Commission threw up a road block Wednesday when they voted down a funding request of \$10,000.

The money would have paid for a therapist and a case manager to identify inmates with mental illness who have committed minor crimes to divert them to a mental health court.

Ultimately, the inmates would receive care and monitoring in the community through Indian Rivers Mental Health. The \$10,000 funding would have paid for a 4-month pilot program.

The county voted it down 3-2, with County Commissioners Don Wallace and Reginald Murray voting for the program and County Commissioners Gary Youngblood, Bobby Miller and Chairman Hardy McCollum voting against.

Wallace said he didn't understand why a small portion of the county's \$72 million in reserves could not be used to possibly alleviate a long-term problem in the county jail.

Earlier this year, the Tuscaloosa County Commission approved a \$15,000 expenditure to send a group of local children to Washington D.C., Wallace said, an expenditure that wasn't originally in the county's budget. Wallace said the commission should have approved Wednesday's request too, if both the sheriff's office and circuit court judges say it's needed.

"It's not an unreasonable request," Wallace said. "We aren't talking about breaking the bank here."

The Tuscaloosa County Jail has been overcrowded for the last 15 years, with a high number of inmates with mental illnesses, according to the Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Department. Around 40 percent of the jail population receives some kind of psychiatric care. As of Wednesday, there were 633 people in the jail, putting it 93 inmates over capacity. Of those inmates, 168 are considered mentally ill and 101 are on psychotropic drugs.

But McCollum said that the issue of inmates with mental illnesses should have been resolved already, saying that the county pays \$90,000 a year for a psychiatrist to work with inmates at the county jail. McCollum asked why the psychiatrist does not come to the probate court to testify for inmates and why she cannot identify inmates who could be diverted to a mental health court.

"We are spending over \$1 million a year on medical costs and drug costs at the jail, why can't the jail psychologist do what needs to be done?" McCollum asked.

Deputy sheriff Ron Abernathy said the jail's psychiatrist is already overworked with inmates who are on suicide watch and emergency cases that need to be stabilized.

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"Does she have time to be a case worker for the mental health court? Absolutely not," Abernathy said.

After the vote, a visibly frustrated Circuit Court Judge Brad Almond, an advocate for the need for a mental health court, walked out of the county commission meeting with Indian Rivers executive director Jim Reddoch.

"They missed a really good opportunity to try something on a trial basis," Reddoch said. "In my personal opinion, the program would have worked very well."

Despite the county's decision, the circuit court judges will continue to work with Indian Rivers on a solution, Almond added.

"We are disappointed with the outcome but the courts will continue to work with Indian Rivers Mental Health on the issue because it is so important and, plain and simple, it's the right thing to do," Almond said.

Tuscaloosa may be the mental health capital of the state, but that doesn't mean the county jail should be the largest mental health provider in the county, even larger than Bryce Hospital at times, depending on the jail population, said Tuscaloosa County Sheriff Ted Sexton.

In many cases, people with mental illness are arrested on a minor charge and end up in jail because family members who don't know what to do with them feel they will receive better care in the jail. It's then up to the county to get those inmates stabilized on their medications. They may sit in jail for as long as six months waiting for their cases to go to court. A mental health court is desperately needed, Sexton said.

"Unfortunately today, the county commissioners that voted no turned their back on mental health within Tuscaloosa County," Sexton said. "Once again, our commission is not identifying and resolving a problem. If there is a community in the state of Alabama that needs a mental health court, it is Tuscaloosa County."

Jail is not the right place for people with mental illness, Sexton added. According to the Olmstead Act, no one with a disability or mental illness should have to live in an institution if they can live in the community with the right support. Sexton said that it's unlawful to keep people with minor violations and mental illness in jail when they could lead better, more stable lives with the assistance of community mental health programs.

The Sheriff's Office originally approached the commission on April 16 to request \$80,000 a year to pay for a therapist and case worker at the jail. The costs would be offset by the county not having to pay to care for inmates with mental illnesses.

Currently the county spends \$300,000 a year on prescription drugs for its inmates and another \$900,000 on medical care at the Tuscaloosa County jail, said county accounting manager Bill Lamb. Exactly how much would be saved by a mental health court is not known.

But at the April meeting, the commission requested more detailed numbers on the proposal. Abernathy returned Wednesday to the commission, offering a pilot program that he said would allow the county to try the program on a trial basis and see how it worked, without committing to it in next year's budget.

The commission, however, still voted it down.

Wallace said the vote was political, and the commission would have likely approved the funding without debate if it hadn't been the Sheriff's Office requesting the

funding. McCollum and Sexton are running against each other for Tuscaloosa County probate judge in November.

“If the judges had asked for \$20,000 to remodel a bathroom at the courthouse, it would have been approved,” Wallace said. “I just don’t think they approved it for mental health because it was the Sheriff’s Office. They should have left politics out of it.”

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