

"They're 'not just numbers:' " Hundreds rally in Tuscaloosa for mental health

Crowd gathers over proposed state funding cuts to health system

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Published: Monday, May 11, 2015 at 11:00 p.m.

Harry Jackson's voice quavered Monday as he discussed the role that the Arc of Tuscaloosa County has played in his family's life and the possibility of cuts to programs that have meant so much in the daily life of his daughter, Ellen.

Jackson's 29-year-old daughter, who has been diagnosed with cerebral palsy and autism, has been participating in the Arc's programs since she was 21. She will need care for the rest of her life.

The possibility of a future without the programs available for Ellen is distressing for Jackson.

"We couldn't do it without the Arc," Jackson said.

Jackson was among the speakers at a rally Monday at Snow Hinton Park in Tuscaloosa where participants gathered to speak against state budget proposals for the upcoming fiscal year that would cut \$35 million in funding for the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

The rally, which drew hundreds in the midday heat, featured comments by staff from the Arc and other area service providers, advocates, clients and their families. Similar events took place across the state on Monday.

Mental Health Commissioner Jim Reddoch and the community-based service providers the state relies on to provide care fear the proposed cuts would cause a reduction in services that would see the task of caring for the mentally ill and intellectually and developmentally disabled fall on the judicial system, hospitals and family members, some of whom like Jackson say they would have to quit their jobs to be able to provide care for their loved ones.

Dr. Kamal Nagi, a staff psychiatrist in the admission ward at Bryce Hospital who was in the audience at the rally Monday, said cuts would also further exacerbate the shortage of available beds at the state hospital.

"We have a good building, a very nice building, but we need the money to fund it," Nagi said. "Two hundred and sixty three beds, that is just not enough."

Shifting the task of caring for the patients now receiving services in the community back to state facilities is not feasible, Nagi said.

"There is no way we could function," he said.

The Arc, which serves about 250 individuals, provides services during the day while



Staff photo | Michelle Lepianka Carter
Michelle Kirkland holds up a sign that reads "I MATTER!" during a Mental Health Awareness Rally held at Snow Hinton Park in Tuscaloosa, Ala. Monday, May 11, 2015. Hundreds of people gathered at a pavilion to listen to speakers have their opinions heard.

Ellen's parents work. The Arc community and its staff have helped his daughter grow, Jackson said.

"If they cut the funding and the programs, Ellen wouldn't have anywhere to go," Jackson said.

James Tucker, executive director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, reiterated a warning the state potentially faces lawsuits if the cuts occur.

"What is going on right now with the proposed funding for mental health is wrong," Tucker said. "The system can't afford it."

The cuts are among possibilities being discussed as an alternative to a budget plan recommended by Gov. Robert Bentley that would use tax and fee increases to raise an additional \$541 million as part of a solution to a General Fund shortfall for the upcoming fiscal year that is estimated to be as much as \$700 million.

Bentley has promoted his plan as he was traveled the state, warning that the proposals by lawmakers less supportive of tax increases could result in the loss of more than 1,000 state jobs and cuts to courts, mental health services and other state operations.

Bentley, who was in Mobile on Monday, had a statement read at the rally in Tuscaloosa, encouraging the audience to contact their representatives in support of a plan for new revenue rather than cuts. The call was echoed by the other speakers Monday.

"Today, we are all on one team and have one goal, and that is to be heard," said Greg Woods, development coordinator for the Arc of Tuscaloosa County.

Randy Phillips, executive director of Indian Rivers Mental Health Center, encouraged the audience to request adequate funding for the Mental Health Department.

"We have stretched these dollars years after year as far as they can be stretched," Phillips said.

Sen. Bobby Singleton, D-Greensboro, a member of the Senate's General Fund committee, said he was supportive of Bentley's call for more revenue.

The general fund budget is still working its way through the House, Singleton said.

"We just don't know where it is until the House moves on it," Singleton said.

Singleton also encouraged people to lobby the governor in support of expanding Medicaid in the state under the Affordable Care Act — a move the Republican from Tuscaloosa has previously opposed — as another possible source of additional funding.

"We in the state of Alabama have a duty to care for these people," Singleton said.

Katie Barnett of Tuscaloosa spoke about the challenge of living with mental illness for 22 years and expressed concern about what would happen to the Alabamians with mental illness if the cuts were enacted.

"My biggest fear is the incidence of suicide will increase significantly," Barnett said.

Some of the rally's speakers framed the discussion of the cuts in terms of morality, calling adequate funding the humane choice.

"We have got to let them know the people we serve are not just numbers; they are people," said Donna Foster, owner of Future Living Community Services, which

provides residential habitation.

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