



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

New mental health chief promises no more layoffs

Commitment to community-based care remains strong

By Dana Beyerle

Montgomery Bureau Chief

Published: Sunday, July 15, 2012 at 3:30 a.m.

MONTGOMERY | Alabama's new mental health commissioner says the department plans no more employee layoffs in mental health facilities in Tuscaloosa, and remains committed to moving most of its clients into the community.

Jim Reddoch, former head of Indian Rivers Mental Health agency, was tapped by Gov. Robert Bentley to succeed Zelia Baugh on July 1, who resigned as commissioner last month for family medical reasons.

"We have made tremendous progress in moving patients into a more modern, community-based care network," Bentley said when appointing Reddoch. "I believe Jim's wealth of experience will serve the state well, most importantly, the patients of the Alabama Department of Mental Health."

Reddoch, 66, is a finance graduate of the University of Alabama. He earned a law degree from Cumberland School of Law and was in private practice for 15 years. He was retired for two years when he was named as director of the Indian Rivers Mental Health Center in Tuscaloosa about five months ago.

Reddoch has a long history with the mental health department. He was deputy commissioner of the Department of Mental Health from 1988-92 under Gov. Guy Hunt and was director of Bryce Hospital from 1992 to 2000. He served as director of the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa from 2000-09.

Reddoch said he first met Bentley when the governor was a state legislator and requested a tour of Bryce Hospital. Bentley was a Tuscaloosa physician in private practice before being elected governor in 2010. Reddoch said they ran into each other occasionally.

"I think he was aware that I had had a lot of experience and a pretty broad knowledge base in the mental health field," Reddoch said last week. "From his own knowledge and his information probably from others he probably thought it was a good fit."

Reddoch said Bentley discussed with him the challenges facing the department, which has fewer patients and employees than when Reddoch first encountered it 24 years ago.

"The obvious one is the budget situation," Reddoch said. "He (Bentley) also mentioned that his goal is what he announced earlier, to downsize the institutional facilities and continue the additional focus on the expansion and enhancement of programs available in the community."



Staff file photo | Dusty Compton

Jim Reddoch, seen in his office on Feb. 14, is the new state mental health commissioner. Reddoch is the former director of Bryce, Taylor Hardin and Indian Rivers Mental Health agency, and the former associate commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health. Reddoch replaces Zelia Baugh, who resigned last month.

RECEPTIONIST

NEEDED FOR SMALL OFFICE,
FULL TIME TEMPORARY FOR SUMMER,
POSSIBLY BECOMING LONG TERM.

CLICK FOR DETAILS

Reddoch said the department plans to continue moving its clients into community-based care.

Copyright © 2012 TuscaloosaNews.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.

“A great majority of them can do that with proper support,” he said.

The statewide move to close facilities for people with mental illness and developmental disabilities began in the 1990s, leading to hundreds of employees being laid off and thousands of patients beginning the transition to community treatment.

Reddoch said there are no more immediate layoffs planned for Tuscaloosa.

Bentley is continuing to push to close Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon and Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery.

“He, of course, asked that I focus on continuing that assignment,” Reddoch said.

Bentley's plans for the department include the continued operation of the North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur, Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility and the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Center in Tuscaloosa, and construction of the new Bryce hospital in Tuscaloosa that will replace the existing one.

New mission

After legislative budget writers told Baugh to develop a worst-case scenario if next fiscal year's mental health department budget had to be cut 25 percent, she proposed closing five mental health centers and changing Bryce Hospital's mission from a treatment center for the mentally ill into a hospital for court-ordered patients.

Those plans met with bitter opposition from local legislators, employees and families of clients. Bentley was forced to change the department's mission to close only Greil and Searcy and reverse plans for the new Bryce. The Mary Starke Harper Center was not slated for closing.

Reddoch said the closings and transfers have not gone as quickly as had been hoped.

“I'm not sure what all the causes were, but it needs to be picked up and revitalized and have a new effort put into it,” he said. “The governor is committed to truly making the effort to serve clients in the least restrictive environment possible.”

Reddoch said the department will focus on the mission of the new Bryce Hospital, including giving the southern part of the state more support, since the two closed hospitals for the mentally ill are in south Alabama.

“Its role and function may change with regard to the areas of the state it serves, and that is still subject to some further discussion, but there's no change in connection with the nature of patients,” Reddoch said.

Taylor Hardin's mission will continue as a secure medical facility for court-committed criminal defendants, Reddoch said.

“Taylor Hardin is the best facility of its type in the United States,” he said. “It serves a great purpose, and there's no reason to change it.”

Budget woes

Reddoch takes over a department that has seen no increase in its budget in four years. Although the state provides about 12 percent of the Mental Health Department's funding, any cut in that 12 percent can be devastating.

“In our system where all dollars are providing services, when you make cuts it's harder to figure how to absorb those without reducing services,” he said.

Reddoch, who named two associate commissioners, began meeting with stakeholders last week, including ARC of Alabama and the Alabama Council of Mental Health Boards.

Mental health board council executive director Jim Dill said Reddoch will have support in navigating the state's budget dilemma.

The ARC's executive director, Tom Holmes, said he believes the department will make decisions with the input of stakeholders.

"I represent the ARC, but I'm also the parent of a son with intellectual disabilities so my main concern is we as individuals and families have a direct involvement in any decisions being made," Holmes said.

Reddoch named department general counsel Courtney Tarver as acting associate commissioner of division of developmental disabilities and Beverly Bell-Shambley as acting associate commissioner for mental health and substance abuse services. She has worked for the department for 26 years.

"I came into this on day one with no second-tier management in place in those critical operating divisions so I had to do something fast and I selected people I have confidence in on an acting basis," Reddoch said.

When Reddoch first entered the mental health department in 1988, it had about 6,000 employees, thousands of clients in institutions, and was under a federal court order to modernize and humanize mental health treatment.

Now the department has about 1,600 employees and about 1,000 institutionalized patients being moved into community treatment.

Reddoch said he came out of retirement because he believes he has the potential to create "meaningful change."

"I felt like I would regret it for rest of my life if I turned away from the opportunity," he said.