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Mental health advocates find footing in face of facility closures

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By Bobby Shuttleworth [CONNECT](#)

DECATUR, AL (WAFF) - With so many mental health facilities in Alabama closing, and there being no place for some patients to go, many families are quickly becoming passionate advocates for the mentally ill.

One woman we spoke with is ready to take her fight to Congress.

"Mental illness is a brain illness. It's not a character flaw. It's not an emotional issue - it's a brain illness," said Julie Moody Collins.

Two decades ago, Collins was treated for mental illness. More recently, a family member also needed treatment.

She has worked for a suicide hotline, crisis services, and is very familiar with the resources and process, yet she could not help her family member find treatment.

"In fact, the answer I got was, 'Just keep calling every week, and maybe you'll get lucky,'" she said.

With so many Alabama mental health facilities closing down, many family members are concerned there will be no place to turn in case of an emergency.

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Collins says there is a reason to be afraid. She recalled the tragic story of Shane Watkins, a man diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia who was shot and killed by a Lawrence County sheriff's deputy.

"It terrifies me... He was willing to get treatment. Signed the papers. No bed was available. They turned him down... He should have been in a hospital," she said.

Tired of hearing about "band-aid" solutions like group homes, when people need treatment for a brain illness not a developmental problem, Collins says they need hospitals and doctors. She and a group of advocates intend to take action.

And, she says, they want to focus on Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) laws.

FACEBOOK: North Alabama Coalition for Mental Illness

"I'm going to Washington, D.C. The Treatment Advocacy Center is sending me... and we're going to re-introduce the bill from Tim Murphy. It's a bill that was started after the Sandy Hook incident, but basically it is to tweak some of the HIPAA laws.

"Patients have rights," she continued. "Patients need rights. However, part of mental illness is lacking insight, and when you're in psychosis you're not able to make the best decisions."

She and others hope that they can get laws tweaked so that psychotic episodes don't end in death, and that people who are battling mental illness have a safe place to go.

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