



The banner features a Samsung Galaxy S5 smartphone on the left with a colorful geometric pattern on its screen. To the right of the phone is a blue button that says "Shop now". Further right is a Twitter icon and the text "For the latest deals, follow @ATTDeals". Below the phone is a circular orange badge that says "Our fastest way to order is att.com". The main text in the center reads "FREE Samsung Galaxy S® 5". Below this, in smaller text, it says "See offer details. Pricing & offers subj. to change. Req's 2-year agmt with qual. plans. Early termination & other fees & restr. apply." At the bottom left of the banner is the ABC 33/40 logo, and at the bottom right is the text "Health Connections • Perfect Home".

## Mental Health leaders fear budget cuts, push for Bentley's tax increases

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By Lauren Walsh [CONNECT](#)

In the Alabama State House, this is the week lawmakers begin to listen to the cries of agencies fearful of major budget cuts.

"Contact your legislators," urged Dr. Richard Craig, Executive Director of the Mental Health Authority for Jefferson, Blount and St. Clair Counties. "Nobody likes taxes. But the impact is going to be devastating not just for the department of mental health but for several other state agencies as well. It's not going to be pretty. Please support the governor's package."

A barebones budget this year would see most agencies lose at least eleven and a half percent of their funding, except Medicaid and Corrections which are each slated for a three percent cut. This is the budget that includes no new revenue from Governor Robert Bentley's eight proposed tax increases.

For the Alabama Department of Mental Health, that translates to \$35 million. Commissioner Jim Reddoch told ABC 33/40 the cuts will actually be closer to \$100 million when the loss of federal matching funds are included.

What would that mean to local services?

Craig says one service that would take a big hit is inpatient care. When a probate court commits someone to the state for inpatient psychiatric treatment, the wait can already stretch to four weeks. Right now, those in our area go to Hillcrest Behavioral Health. That service would be lost. The alternative, getting patients into Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa, could take eight weeks or more.

"I think that would be disastrous," said Barbara Walker.

Walker is a psychiatric social worker at Hillcrest Behavioral Health. She says the longer the delay is in care, the higher the risk for both patient and the community.

"You can imagine that you're a patient and you were not taking your medicine for four weeks, you would become very paranoid," explained Walker. "You would begin to hear voices. And those voices might be telling you not only was your family out to get you, but the neighbor was out to get you."

"We just won't be able to respond as quickly as we can now which is going to impact public safety," said Craig.

Craig must be ready to cut three million dollars from his budget in case state lawmakers do not raise new revenue.

"We've been sponsoring local inpatient care to treat people in a local hospital instead of sending them to Bryce Hospital," explained Craig. "What it will mean is that the majority of that effort will have to end."

The bottom line is longer wait times.

"It's going to increase the number of mentally ill people who are untreated and on the street," said Craig. "It's probably going to have an impact to increase homelessness. It's going to have an impact on jails and prisons with the number of mentally ill people in jails and prisons probably increasing as well."

With money on the line, Craig makes a plea for help.

"Contact your legislators," urged Craig. "Nobody likes taxes. But the impact is going to be devastating not just for the department of mental health but for several other state agencies as well. It's not going to be pretty. Please support the governor's package."

Dr. Craig says outpatient care will also be affected in his three counties. Eastside, UAB and Western Medical Health Centers each provide psychiatric services and supervision for patients. Craig says their budget cuts will mean programs are gone.

Wednesday, Commissioner Reddoch will make his case to lawmakers in budget hearings to try to persuade them not to cut his budget. The hearing is at 2:00 p.m. at the State House in Montgomery. The departments of Corrections, Medicaid and Mental Health make their pitches to the House General Fund Committee.

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