



ROBERT BENTLEY
GOVERNOR

STATE OF ALABAMA
DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH
RSA UNION BUILDING
100 NORTH UNION STREET
POST OFFICE BOX 301410
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 36130-1410
WWW.MH.ALABAMA.GOV



ZELIA BAUGH
COMMISSIONER

FEATURE STORY SUBMISSION

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Contact: Office of Public Information
334.242.3417

MENTAL HEALTH DOLLARS GO A LONG WAY

MONTGOMERY – For many individuals with intellectual disabilities, living in the community is their ultimate goal. Bryant Sanderson, now 41 years old, has survived living in a cardboard box behind a gas station and is now thriving in his very own apartment. He is an example of just how life changing mental health funding can be.

Sanderson grew up in the small town of Millry and lived with his parents most of his young adult life. His home life was less than desirable, and in the 90s he began staying with several different individuals from the community, moving from place to place. He eventually became homeless and lived in a shed behind a gas station in Millry in a makeshift home constructed from a cardboard box. Some years later, Sanderson's brother and sister-in-law assumed guardianship. He started receiving services from the Educational Center for Independence in Chatom, and his life was changed forever.

Sanderson began attending ECI's day habilitation program, which he continues to participate in to this day. Day habilitation provides a host of opportunities, including recreation, community involvement, social skills improvement and volunteerism. Sanderson has taken a special delight in becoming an active member of the Chatom community. He has served as the water boy for the Millry High School football team for nearly a decade and receives trophies each year during the school's football banquet. Sanderson started participating in the Special Olympics as soon as he began attending ECI. He has become an incredible golfer and has participated in regional, state and even national games, winning numerous medals. A local pastor is Sanderson's golf partner and plays with him in each of his meets. ECI also helped Sanderson find more appropriate living conditions. As he developed skills to live more independently, he moved into a trailer park near the Millry State Lake in 2008, and later that year he moved into an apartment in Chatom. Staff from ECI assist Sanderson several days a week in the apartment where he continues to live and participate in ECI programs and community life.

Alicia Atcheson, executive director at ECI, says, "Bryant is an outstanding young man. The supports he has received through ECI have brought about significant changes in his life. He has made friends all over the county and is a well-known and well-respected member of the community." For such an inspirational member of the community who has received help and taken responsibility for his own life, it would be a tragedy if funding for the supports he receives were cut. With Alabama's looming budget crisis, thousands of people receiving community services for intellectual disabilities or mental illnesses are at risk of losing services. Without these supports, many will become ill, pack overcrowded emergency rooms and jails, or revert to an expensive and constricted system of institutional care. This will cost the state much more in dollars, but the greater costs will be the absence of people like Bryant Sanderson who brighten our communities and inspire us all.

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