



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

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*Contact: Office of Public Information*  
334.242.3417

**COMMISSIONER BAUGH BRINGS LEGISLATORS AND PEOPLE WITH  
DISABILITIES TOGETHER IN STATEWIDE MEET & GREETINGS**

*Events provided opportunity to share and learn valuable information*

MONTGOMERY – From late October to mid-January, ADMH Commissioner Zelia Baugh canvassed the state at 15 Meet & Greet town hall-style events. Crisscrossing the state from Florence to Dothan and Huntsville to Mobile, Baugh shared information about critical issues facing the state's public mental health system. She also listened as consumers, family members and providers gave feedback on what they felt the system was doing right and where it needed improvement. In addition, many elected officials attended, and were able to ask questions about services and listen to their constituents in an informal setting. They listened as some people expressed their gratitude and cited specific incidents where the state or community programs saved their lives. Others in the audience made emotional appeals for their loved ones who have been on waiting lists for many years.

Almost everyone expressed concern about the FY13 budget. People served by community programs have few alternatives if those programs are cut. As the department has downsized facilities over the years, community programs have become the only safety net. ADMH's six psychiatric hospitals serve approximately 4,000 people per year. Contract providers support approximately 110,000 people per year with mental illness services in the community. More than 6,000 people with intellectual disabilities receive services, and more than 25,000 people receive substance abuse treatment services through community providers. For most of these individuals, community programs are imperative for supports, treatment and recovery. At the Meet & Greets, legislators, public officials and mental health officials listened to real-life stories about the consequences of losing these support services. Many people would have to go back into institutional life, which is more than twice the cost of community services.

Along with discussing upcoming budget challenges, participants also discussed current unmet needs, such as the waiting list and underserved populations. Commissioner Baugh suggested that everyone speak with one voice regarding the importance of these services. The following are common themes that surfaced in all of the 15 meetings:

- Mental health is an essential function of state government.
- Mental health consumers, their family members, advocates, providers and other mental health stakeholders can no longer afford to be a silent majority.
- The need for level funding for FY13, before the FY12 proration, is vital.
- ADMH has already been a good steward of taxpayer dollars through many cost-cutting measures that have been implemented. A reduction in workforce (from 2,574 a year ago to 1,874 today), closing the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center, and operational efficiencies reduced a FY12 deficit by more than \$40 million.
- Waiting lists continue to grow.

- For every one general fund dollar spent on substance abuse treatment, the state saves \$7 in services for people with substance use disorders.

As she wrapped up the last Meet & Greet in Jackson on January 12, Baugh was less than one week away from her first anniversary as commissioner of ADMH. The Meet & Greets provided an appropriate opportunity to share not only her many first-year accomplishments, but also the many remaining challenges ahead for the thousands who rely on Alabama's public mental health system. Most importantly, the voices of the people were heard, and those who listened had a renewed commitment to give Alabama citizens the tools to recover and experience an inclusive life in the community.

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