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Treat, not punish mentally ill

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Well, it's over, at least the easy portion of a very complex task. The Alabama Department of Mental Health has sold the Bryce Mental Hospital property in Tuscaloosa to the University of Alabama.

And, fortunately, both sides appear to have won in a battle that has stretched over many, many years. The biggest winner will be the mentally ill, those who love them and those who provide care for them. As usual, the only stumbling block in this process was money.

The University of Alabama first offered a shameful \$30 million for the 168 acres of pristine property which joins the campus of the University. The Department of Mental Health didn't need or use most of the land but it did need the funds to build a new, much smaller, hospital and to develop housing and programs for the continued expansion of community-based care for the mentally ill.

I have been fortunate enough to serve on the mental health board for several years and have been involved with treatment programs for the mentally ill and retarded for more than 40 years. I made the motion that we simply refuse the first offer from the University, even going so far as to suggest that if University trustees would not come up with a fair sales price that the property be placed on the open market and sold to the highest bidder.

Of course, that would never happen because the University badly needed the land. But the Department of Mental Health also badly needed a new hospital and new community-based facilities. The era of those huge, inhumane and poorly financed state hospitals is over.

After the University made its \$30 million bid, I went to Tuscaloosa and met with Paul Bryant Jr. and told him that he had to come up with the money. He is one of the most powerful members of the University's Board of Trustees. He said the university simply did not have the cash. That really is a joke. The University is probably the only entity in Tuscaloosa County which has more money than Paul Bryant. I suggested he simply dip into the University's endowment funds and write us a check. He said that couldn't be done, either.

Well, guess where the bulk of the money came from. You're right, that same endowment fund which Bryant said could not be tapped. The mental health board met on Tuesday morning with Gov. Bob Riley and signed off on the deal, and the university's executive committee met Tuesday afternoon and agreed to the deal. All the papers were signed on Thursday.

Under the agreement, the University will pay \$72 million for Bryce and further agreed to spend \$10

million on improving the grounds. It will take full responsibility for cleanup of hazardous waste sites where the motor pool was located around the giant hospital's laundry site.

The University also with spend \$6.5 million to restore and stabilize the main hospital building and \$3.5 million to decontaminate land polluted by gasoline and other toxins. The University also agreed to pay the Department of Mental Health \$5.75 million for the Harper Center, a facility on the Bryce grounds which houses elderly psychiatric patients.

When the federal court decreed some 35 years ago that Bryce hospital was a monstrous institution and that i's thousands of patients were not being adequately treated, housed or even fed, it forcefully intervened. The state set in motion the plan to empty as quickly as possible every patient who did not need to be there and those whose needs could be met in community facilities, such as the excellent East Alabama Mental Health Center, located near Tiger Town in Opelika.

In the next two or three years as the hospital is completed Bryce probably will have less than 250 patients. But they will be housed in a state-of-the-art hospital that Gov. Riley promised to build. His leadership made the sale possible and the new hospital possible.

At the governor's request I joined Kathy Sawyer, former Commissioner of Mental Health of Alabama, on a trip to Miami where the transition that Alabama is making had already been carried out. There they had a much scaled-down hospital on beautiful grounds, wonderful programs and wonderful housing. We came back and reported to the governor that was the way Alabama should go. Now, it is happening.

But, as I mentioned in the beginning, a much larger problem is looming. Too many of those individuals removed from Bryce in recent years have been going in circles, but those small circles did not often enough involve stops at mental health facilities. The circles were small. They were sent to prison, got little if any mental health treatment, served their time, hit the streets, got in trouble again and went back behind bars.

That's where we stand today and it's just a matter of time before another federal court case is filed demanding that Alabama's prisons and the nation's prisons either treat the mentally ill or build new facilities where they can receive the help they need. The mentally ill, except for the ones who commit heinous crimes deserve treatment, not punishment.

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