

State offers help to mental health reformers, but no money



Mental health treatment providers, advocates and critics fill a hall in Madison County on Oct. 18, 2016 to begin trying to reform a system that puts homeless mentally ill people in jail because there's nowhere else to put them. (Lee Roop/lroop@al.com)



By **Lee Roop** | lroop@al.com

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Alabama Mental Health Commissioner Jim Perdue told Huntsville leaders Tuesday there's no state money to help move mentally ill people out of jails and into even temporary treatment.

"Everything we always talk about comes down to that one thing: money," Perdue said. "I didn't bring anything with me."

Purdue spoke at a meeting called by the Madison County Commission seeking answers to a revolving jail door that sees people picked up on the streets, jailed, released, and then picked up again.

The Madison County Jail has more than 300 inmates on psychotropic medicine this week, Commissioner Bob Harrison said, and it's costing \$45 a day to keep each of them in jail.

"Forty percent of state inmates have either mental health or substance abuse issues," Perdue added.

"We can do a better job for \$50 a day somewhere else, bottom line," Harrison said. "So, when the question is asked, 'Where's the money going to come from?' The money's already there, in our opinion."

The police officers, deputies, judges, mental health workers and advocates assembled Tuesday took the first step to forming a task force to study current services, what they cost and possible changes.

They heard a presentation from Leon Evans, founder of a resource and rehabilitation center that takes in mentally ill, intoxicated and drugged people picked up by police in San Antonio and Bexar County, Texas. In 15 minutes, Evans said, police can be in and out of the center, which offers short-term beds, rehabilitation and detox services.

Evans said a small percentage of repeat cases is costing every system. "What you'll see is you have 2 or 3 percent who need more than inpatient/outpatient care. They need crisis intervention, short-term residential and other kinds of support you don't pay for," Evans said he told an insurance company. "If you'll do that, you actually save more money."

Perdue said he liked a funding option suggested by Huntsville attorney Tom Ryan. Ryan said 15 percent of the jail's inmates (more than 100 people) are in jail today because they can't make bond, often on non-violent offenses. Turn them loose awaiting trial and save the daily expense of locking them up, he said. "There's our seed money to start this whole project," Ryan said.

Huntsville police Sgt. Jonathan Ware said the department supports change. "So much of what we do is affected by the mental health community, from drug and substance abuse to homelessness to families who don't know what to do with family members," Ware said. He said it's a major squeeze on personnel resources.

The CEO of Wellstone Behavioral Health, the county's existing non-profit mental health center, said his team wants to be involved. "There is really more (being done now) than we realize," Davis said. He said a task force could bring those efforts together in "the most efficient and effective way."

The next step will be forming the task force and beginning a survey of current services and their cost, Harrison indicated.

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