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Mental health facility planned for Alexandria

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Local mentally ill patients in need of long-term care will soon receive help at a new 16-bed Alexandria facility, part of Alabama's shift away from large state mental health hospitals.

The Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health Board, based in Anniston, approved on Tuesday the construction of a 16-bed, 7,810 square-foot facility in Alexandria on U.S. 431. Called a designated mental health facility, the center will provide long-term care for court-committed, non-criminal patients. The facility is part of a state plan to close or downsize its large mental hospitals and open smaller community-based centers, which some mental health experts say are more cost effective and provide better care.

Mickey Turner, executive director of the Mental Health Board, said construction will begin next week and has a March 1, 2014, completion date. Turner added that the board will hire 20 employees to staff the 24-hour-a-day facility, including registered nurses, therapists and a part-time psychiatrist. The facility will be located on property the board already owns, in front of two houses used in the care of developmentally disabled patients. The facility will treat patients exhibiting symptoms such as major depression, suicidal tendencies or erratic behavior.

Turner said he did not yet have a cost estimate for the facility. The Alabama Department of Mental Health received an extra \$13.5 million for the 2014 fiscal year from the state Legislature to pay for several of the new facilities in the northern part of the state.

The facilities are necessary in part because the state closed Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon and Greil Montgomery Psychiatric Hospital late last year due to budget deficits. Also, services are being scaled back at Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa and North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur. However, the smaller, community-based centers are also part of a trend in mental health care across the country, Turner said.

"It's more cost-effective for the state, more cost-effective for the community and there is more family support, which is vital," Turner said.

Turner said that in many cases, local patients sent to one of the state's mental hospitals tend to return there just a few months after being released. The board's goal is to treat patients committed to the facility by the courts for between two to three weeks. Meanwhile, patients in immediate crisis will be treated there between four to seven days until they are stabilized. After they're released, the facility's patients will receive continued treatment through one of the board's outpatient programs at its main facility in Anniston.

Lt. Jon Garlick, mental health officer for the Calhoun County Sheriff's Office,

said the county has a vital need for the new facility, especially since the closing of the state hospitals.

"It's a necessity ... if we don't have this then we'll have more mentally ill in jail," Garlick said.

Garlick said he traditionally averages 15 petitions per month for patients in need of emergency mental care, half of whom are sent for outpatient care at the county mental health department and the other half for inpatient care at a state mental hospital. Garlick said he also has an average of seven patients each month who must be hospitalized at RMC.

"Now with this facility opening, I'll send as many as I can there and the overflow to RMC," Garlick said.

Alice Martin, Calhoun County probate judge, who gives orders to commit patients to mental health facilities after a petition is filed, said she was pleased the county was gaining the new facility.

"There is a tremendous need for our local patients who need inpatient treatment," Martin said. "I'm very thankful this location has been secured."

Martin said that on average, she holds five hearings each week for mental health commitment petitions. The majority of those petitions result in court-ordered outpatient treatment at the mental health department for the person in question.

The board had originally planned to locate the facility in a residential neighborhood on Leighton Avenue in Anniston, due in part to the site's proximity to Regional Medical Center. However, the Anniston Planning Commission in August voted not to rezone the location for the facility, after some residents voiced concerns about safety.

Garlick said having the facility in Alexandria instead will not be much of a problem. As mental health officer, Garlick has the authority to send residents to a facility for mental evaluation for up to 72 hours if they exhibit dangerous or disruptive behavior to themselves or others, such as trying to commit suicide or trespassing in residences.

"It would have been better logistically in Anniston," Garlick said. "But it won't be too much of an issue."

Martin also did not have a problem with the facility's location in Alexandria.

"I don't foresee a problem with it not being in the city of Anniston," she said.

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