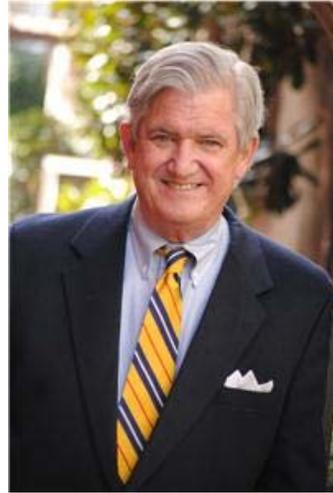




Roy Exum: Alabama's Mental Horror

Tuesday, August 16, 2016 - by Roy Exum



Roy Exum

About a year ago in Alabama, Marion County Sheriff's deputies arrested a man named Jimmy Cooper and took him to confinement facilities because, as the arrest report stated, "He was a danger to himself and others." His charge ("harassment") was a misdemeanor but there were no psychiatric facilities available so the sheriff had no recourse but to free him. There was no doubt he was mentally disturbed but jailers are hardly trained in psychiatric medicine so, seven months later, Jimmy shot and killed two innocent people in the town of Hamilton.

The news staff at AL.com (it's a collaborative of newspapers in Alabama) has just released the first in a series of a tragic report on the lack of mental care in Alabama. The study was triggered by the fact the cash-strapped state of Alabama has been forced to close three psychiatric hospitals since 2012 and today -- get this -- there are only 268 public beds to serve the entire state.



The result is that the county jails are now the only place to take some very sick mentally-ill people. Escambia County Sheriff Grover Smith told AL.com, "We have a 17-year-old girl in jail for trying to burn her house down with her mom and dad in it.

"The county jail is not the best place for her, we all agree, but we have no other options for her and no one comes to see her or counsel her. We have a psychologist who comes by once a month and talks to her. But he's not here for treatment, but to make sure no one (with mental problems) hurts themselves."

A team of AL.com newspaper reporters reached out to 40 sheriffs and at least 70 percent said they were holding someone in need of psychiatric services but had nowhere to turn. Walker County jail administrator Trent McClusky said there was indeed an increase in mental illness and that treatment has gotten better ... "Yet we receive less funding to treat what we diagnose. What's the point of diagnosing what we are not going to treat?"

The result? Calhoun County Sheriff Larry Amerson's officers have had to use 'deadly force' six times "and four were severely mentally ill. One tried to set himself on fire and then killed his girlfriend and her two children. We ultimately shot and killed him but not before he shot a deputy in the leg."

Between 2009 and 2014 funding for state-run psychiatric hospitals was whittled down from \$171 million to \$96 million. Escambia County's Smith said that since then he has had one female in his jail "at least 25 times ... she will go into the office or the lobby and take up residence. Sometimes she keeps her clothes on and sometimes she takes them off. Obviously she needs inpatient care but there is none available."

Lee County Sheriff Jay Jones said they saw a guy numerous times who was fine as long as he took his medicine. "... but he would get off of them, get into trouble, and be back in jail. All he had to do was take his meds but one day we found him deceased out in the county because of the lack of resources. There was simply nowhere for him to go."

And what a price the entire state is having to pay.

In 2010 Mobile County had 768 prisoners they were able to classify with mental illness. In 2011 the state closed Searcy Hospital and by the next year the number "almost doubled." Jail warden Trey Oliver said he's seen nearly 1,000 suffering from mental illness already this year. About 235 are taking psychotropic meds and many cannot be housed in the general population.

But that's just a tip of the iceberg. "We have one wedge (of cells) that would normally house 30 but we have to limit it to 13 due to their medications. Then we have another wedge of about 15 who refuse to take medicine and we have to keep them completely separate. Then we have 13 more who are on suicide watch in a third wedge." What he failed to say is that all 42 should be in a mental hospital.

Oliver said "about 15 percent" of those incarcerated by Mobile County take some type of psychotropic medicines but that in itself creates another problem. Last year attacks on guards were double the norm and, in Elmore County, Sheriff Bill Franklin has a hair-raising story.

With community-based mental health care failing, the sheriff said, "We had one guy come in who had not had his shot in 90 days. He thinks I am a dragon sent from Satan himself. He goes to a medical ward in north Alabama and I asked the facility to let me know when he gets out.

"About two months later, I wake up and hear somebody trying to tear my front door down at 3 a.m. I went in the kitchen and saw him running away across a field. I told my wife, 'I know who that guy is.' The next morning I called the facility and, yep, he'd gotten out two days earlier.

"The strangest thing is this," Sheriff Franklin added, "When he's on his medicines you couldn't tell which one of us is mentally ill."

No, the strangest thing by far is that the mental health facility in north Alabama has since been closed. Now where does the guy who attacked the sheriff's door go?

This from Lauderdale County Sheriff Rick Singleton: "It's not going to get any better. The state doesn't have any money. It's not just the mentally ill. Local detention centers are going to be faced with more and more challenges from having people incarcerated in our local jails."

Somewhere there has to be a solution because, until they find it, literally everyone involved will suffer. And the very ones who most need our help will suffer the worst.

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August 16, 2016

How A Young U.S. Soldier And Last True Emperor Of Ethiopia Met

It was the early or mid 1960s when my brother, U.S. Army, received orders he would be shipped to Ethiopia (in or around Addis Ababa) to a U.S. military installation. It wasn't the original plan ... (click for more)

August 15, 2016

Teachers Can't Be Expected To Do The Impossible

As I read in the CTFP that about one-third of our teachers were not up to par and were teaching in some of our worse failing schools, I spent some time thinking about our children. In the past ... (click for more)

August 15, 2016

All That Is Right And Good With The CPD

Saturday I was in line for lunch at Chick-fil-A on Brainerd Road. In front of me was a Chattanooga police officer on his break. In front of him was a little boy in his mama's arms. ... (click for more)

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