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The Issue

The mental health system is broken, and area law enforcement officials are calling for change.

Two apparent crimes in two days gave some insight into the extent to which law enforcement increasingly has become immersed in dealing with mental health issues.

On Aug. 25, a Decatur woman refused psychiatric help at Decatur Morgan Hospital, according to police, and proceeded to drive off in an ambulance parked outside the hospital.

The next day, an elderly man told a teller at an Athens bank he was holding the bank up. He then told her he needed psychiatric help, and this was the only way he knew to get it. The unarmed man sat quietly and awaited police.

In the first case, Decatur police placed the woman in jail and charged her with a felony. In the second case, Athens police declined to charge the man and Chief Floyd Johnson has been involved in the effort to obtain psychiatric care for him.

It's tempting to criticize Decatur PD for not being more sensitive to a person whose misconduct appeared to be a function of her illness rather than of criminal intent, and Johnson certainly deserves

credit for his handling of the Athens situation.

The fact is, though, that law enforcement officers are trained and equipped to enforce laws, not to evaluate mental illnesses. They don't have the resources to become the primary bridge between the mentally ill and health providers.

"Law enforcement by its very nature is reactive," Morgan County Sheriff Ana Franklin said. "But it shouldn't be that way with the mental health system."

Sadly, the mental health system is not just reactive, it is dysfunctional. Beds are scarce, especially with the closure of facilities like North Alabama Regional Hospital. Even those who are committed average 10-day stays, according to Franklin, which for many is inadequate.

The poorly funded state Medicaid Agency also is a factor, as it contributes to a shortage of mental health providers.

Franklin, who is a member of a state task force assigned with the mission of finding solutions to mental health problems, said the ultimate problem is funding. Law enforcement sees first hand the enormity of the problem, and its cost to society. So do caregivers and judges and mental health professionals. They understand that skimping on a proactive mental health system costs money, in the form of greater pressure on law enforcement, more crimes and crowded jails. And most also recognize the terrible toll our underfunded mental health system exacts on the mentally ill and their families.

But it is not law enforcement or judges or health care providers that make the call on funding issues. That job falls primarily to state lawmakers, and they routinely place mental health near the bottom of their list of funding priorities.

That's a mistake, both financially and morally.