

# Find way to avoid mental health cuts

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(Photo: The Register)

Nowhere is the moral integrity of the Alabama Legislature more on the line, as it grapples with a deep hole in next year's General Fund, than in proposed cuts in services for the mentally ill and disabled.

The House this week approved a cut of \$5.2 million to mental health programs as part of its no-new-revenue General Fund budget.

Gov. Robert Bentley has rightly vowed to veto the irresponsible package, which includes none of his \$541 million funding proposals and would badly damage state agencies across the board.

In short, everything remains dangerously uncertain for the Alabama Department of Mental Health and its vital work.

The agency serves some 3,000 Alabamians in state-operated facilities and more than 100,000 in community-based programs, individuals with afflictions such as schizophrenia, Down syndrome, autism or severe emotional disorders.

It also has an unconscionably long waiting list of more than 3,200 people because of chronic underfunding.

The House's \$5.2 million cut would have unacceptable results, but consider the disastrous consequences ahead for the ADMH if lawmakers continue refusing to approve Bentley's tax initiatives:

- As many as 24,000 people with mental illness will lose services or see them drastically reduced.
  - Group homes and supported housing programs will close, forcing out hundreds of mentally ill or disabled individuals. The lucky ones will go back with their families, but that burden of care will likely cause family members to lose jobs.
- As for the rest, they'll end up homeless, in ERs, or in jails and prisons unequipped to handle them.
- Outpatient psychiatric services for thousands of mentally ill Alabamians will also vanish, including access to medications.
  - An estimated 1,080 mental health center employees will lose their jobs, as centers close or scale down. Residents of some counties will have no access to mental health services.
  - Employment and day programs for the intellectually disabled would be shuttered or diminished, causing more job losses for family members.

And that's just the short list.

Bentley has vowed to call a special session if the Legislature doesn't fulfill its obligation to adequately fund state functions such as those the ADMH provides.

Good for him for not giving up this critical crusade.

But he isn't entirely the knight in shining armor on mental health care. He has lagged too long in calling for an expansion of Alabama's Medicaid program under the Affordable Care Act.

The expansion wouldn't solve the crisis, but would greatly increase health-care providers' ability to serve the mentally ill.

He should take on that mantle too.



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