

'Illness to Wellness': Town hall meetings address mental health



Kym Klass, Montgomery Advertiser 1:42 p.m. CDT July 28, 2016



(Photo: governor.alabama.gov)

The story of mental health is so many times defined not by what is being done, but by what is not being done. Or, what is not capable of being done.

And the state's department of mental health commissioner, Jim Perdue, told a group of more than 100 at a town hall meeting at the Montgomery Mental Health Authority on Wednesday that he wants to make sure people understand mental health, and that they "get" the message of a delivery he is spreading in more than 20 town hall meetings across the state.



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"I want to make sure they know all the things they need to know about the department of mental health," he said. "People know everything about mental health that they want to know. Not very much, because they want to ... hide it and keep it in the shadows, but we can't do that. We have an obligation to serve the people who can't speak for themselves. Many of our consumers don't have a voice, and that's why we're here."



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The state's General Fund budget, which is where the department of mental health receives its money, has bottomed out, said Henry Parker, director of the Montgomery Area Mental Health Authority.

"We receive level funding and level funding is really a cut because everything goes up and we do not get any additional funding and we're constantly being asked to do more with less," he said. "Commissioner Perdue is holding town hall meetings across the state to try and get legislators involved, stakeholders throughout the state involved and find out what their concerns are."

Perdue addressed several points surrounding mental health, including the health of those in prison.

Of the 25,000 people in Alabama prisons, it is alleged that 40 percent have a serious mental illness, or a substance abuse issue, Perdue said. And if that's the case, he added, that equates to 10,000 prisoners.



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"If that's the reason that they're there, then how are we treating them?" he asked. "We spend \$12 million a year for a company to come inside the prisons to assess and treat prisoners. That's my job, and that's what I told the people that are involved with prisons. If we can take those people that are dying ... and move them out. They are not a flight risk, they are bedridden. Do you know who pays for them? The state. No VA benefits, the insurance benefits, no Medicaid, no Medicare.



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"You are a non citizen; you are therefore the ward of the state. But if we could legislatively define who can be released ... I have a group that will take one of my buildings at Searcy Hospital and create that same facility and lease the building from me. The department of archives and history tells me that this is the most historic untouched piece of property in the state. So I could not only remove those prisoners, if we could decide who is eligible and put them into this hospital, (then) I could take the money and restore a historic piece of property. No new dollars. As a matter of fact, it's just going to save dollars."

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The next town hall meeting is scheduled for Tuesday in West Jefferson. Future meetings will be held in cities including Florence, Huntsville and Cullman.

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