

Mental health officials say cuts to state budget hinders public safety;perpetuates crisis calls

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, February 5, 2016 12:15 am

FLORENCE — The shooting of a Lauderdale County deputy while he was serving mental commitment papers at a Florence residence has raised questions about what, if anything, could have been done to prevent the situation.

Deputy Randall McCrary remains in Huntsville Hospital where he is recovering after surgery for his injuries. He was shot in the arm and chest.

The resident, Timothy Murphy, was shot during the incident as well. He is recovering from his injuries after surgery at Huntsville Hospital.

Florence Police Chief Ron Tyler, who has been an outspoken critic of state cuts to mental health services, said Wednesday night's shooting sheds an even greater light on the plight of law enforcement officers not being qualified to deal with mental health issues.

"When police have to respond to calls involving people in a crisis state, the thinking is so irrational that our standard techniques are ineffective," he said.

"Law enforcement is being called upon to handle a medical condition, and it makes no sense. There's certainly a greater collaborative effort needed between the mental health and law enforcement communities, and cutting funding is the last thing that needs to happen."

Gov. Robert Bentley recently proposed level funding for mental health, which doesn't allow for tweaking programs or adding new ones that could help diffuse crisis situations between the mentally ill and law enforcement, officials have said.

"It's a public safety issue," said Bryan Libell, director of Riverbend Center for Mental Health. "We have a good working relationship with local law enforcement, but very limited resources in having people trained in these situations. With preventative services cut, you just have to triage in the most critical cases."

He said law enforcement did a great job responding to the call Wednesday night, and should be commended.

"I just fear that this could be indicative of things to come," Libell said. "Hopefully, this situation will serve as a wake-up call and realization that cuts are detrimental to society."

Tyler agreed, saying mental health cuts at the state level mean reductions in services for the mentally ill.

"Do the math. That's more people in crisis and the police continue to go on those calls," he said.

Protective measures, like adding the names of those with mental illness to the list of those who can't purchase guns, would be a positive step toward greater public protection, Tyler added.

"People can be in a crisis state and go get a firearm, and the background check never shows a mental illness. Something is wrong with that," he said.