

New Bryce Hospital offers privacy

State's mental health facility sheds institutional image

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The new Bryce Hospital, which was dedicated last month by Gov. Robert Bentley and other state officials, was designed with privacy in mind in an effort to improve patient outcomes and make the new facility seem less institutional.

"The research is suggesting the greater the privacy patients are getting the less violence and aggression you are getting," said Frank Pitts, principal with Architecture + of Troy, N.Y., one of the two firms on the hospital's design team.

Architecture +, which has expertise in mental health facilities, consulted with Sherlock, Smith and Adams of Montgomery on the 260,000-square-foot, \$81 million facility.

The new hospital on the grounds of the former Partlow Developmental Center features classrooms, medical and dental clinics, recreational and fitness areas including interior courtyards, a cafeteria, barber shop, library, chapel and post office. The hospital has 268 beds, offering a mix of private and double rooms that include accommodations for deaf and hearing-impaired patients. Bentley praised the new facility as cutting-edge during the dedication on May 21 in Tuscaloosa. Pitts called the new facility efficient and flexible.

"It was designed to accommodate a lot of different patient profiles," he said.

The trend toward more privacy is part of a general shift in thinking about the design of hospitals, not just mental facilities, Pitts said.

The more homelike, the more domestic the features of the facility, the better the outcomes for patients, he said. The concept influences everything from color palates to windows to the presence or absence of fences at the perimeter.

"This isn't a jail. We are trying to help people get better," Pitts said.

There is a balance to privacy and supervision.

"It's trying to find a happy medium," he said.

The facility is meant for mental health patients who need a more structured care environment, but the designers sought to make the hospital seem less institutional.

"It's easy to make an environment safe and sterile," Pitts said.

A lot of thought went into access control, according to David Parker with Sherlock, Smith and Adams of Montgomery, who added the controls allow staff to track



Michelle Lepianka Carter / The Tuscaloosa News

This gymnasium is part of the new Bryce Hospital, which was dedicated by Gov. Robert Bentley and other state officials last month. The facility was designed to give patients more privacy in an effort to improve treatment and reduce violence and aggression.

comings and goings, access to certain areas and other aspects.

“It will be one of the most sophisticated buildings in the state in terms of electronics,” Parker said.

Parker said the facility doesn’t need fences because the building serves as its own secure perimeter with controlled access points.

The designers looked for materials and fittings for the new hospital, which looked more domestic than penal. It was a challenging search because the market for those features is dominated by corrections customers, Pitts said.

Parker said the architects and their clients spent about two years in the design process reviewing options and finding the right fixtures for the new hospital.

Pitts said the architects met with the university and mental health officials about the level of risks in certain high-risk environments such as bedrooms and bathrooms. The architects were asked to develop high-risk rooms that were as safe as possible.

The designers and their clients spent time using a mock-up room, exploring fixtures and furniture and their installation as part of planning.

“A lot of it is incredibly subtle. You wouldn’t even know about it unless someone told you,” Pitts said, noting

tamper-resistant electrical sockets with ground fault protections and the option for the staff to turn them off if necessary.

Parker noted the exterior windows were selected to withstand “a large man basically crashing into it.” The glass panes and frames had to be able to withstand the equivalent of 2,000 foot-pounds of force striking it.

While all of the public spaces and corridors are visible from the nurse stations, the bedrooms offer privacy to the patients. It might seem more counterintuitive, but Pitts said giving patients spaces where they can choose who they are with and where they are reduces aggression and acting up, reducing the need for direct supervision.

“Providing a little more choice, a little more privacy is worth it because it reduces violence,” he said.

As planning began for the new hospital, the state’s original desire was for all private patient rooms, according to David Jackson, chief operating officer for the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

But a psychologist recommended against only providing single-patient rooms because roommates offer therapeutic value for some patients. The building has 11 residential units, where nursing teams will manage groups of about 25 patients, Parker said. The units are grouped in a way to foster a sense of community among the patients.

“It’s important for them to be able to establish a sense of community,” Parker said.

The state hopes to begin moving patients from existing facilities on the historic Bryce Hospital grounds to the new building in about a month. The phased move was originally expected to be completed by June 24, but is expected to be delayed by a couple of weeks while workers finish remaining punch lists for the new building, Jackson said.

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