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The Investigators: How funding cuts have impacted mental health in Alabama

Megan Wiebold mwiebold@waaytv.com Updated 22 hrs ago



"It's going to take some more money, and we're going to have to face this," says Alabama Department of Mental Health Commissioner Jim Perdue.

A lot has changed in the past ten years.

When you look at the budget for the Alabama Department of Mental Health this 2016 budget year compared to ten years ago, there have been increases, but mostly along the lines of inflation rates.

General Fund 2006-2007 budgeted: \$131,495,264

General Fund 2016 budgeted: \$106,072,435

But the state has contributed less and less to the department, about 25 million less this year than in 2006.

Federal and local funds 2006-2007 budgeted: \$365,956,949

Federal and local funds 2016 budgeted: \$582,236,364

While local and federal governments have increased their share by about 216 million dollars.

"It sounds real good, level funding does not cover inflation of physicians, or medicines, or escalating leases, or even employees getting any type of raise, not just the department of mental health, but our contractors, so level funding does not hurt, but it doesn't help a whole lot," says Perdue.

A big chunk of the Department of Mental Health's budget is paid for by taxes, things like part of an electricity and water tax, contractors' gross receipts tax and others.

In this budget year, we're also expecting more than \$2 million in cigarette tax revenue for the Department of Mental Health.

But one thing that's interesting to note, mental health funding from the state, comes in part from alcohol sales tax.

In fact, in this budget year, we're expecting nearly \$17 million from the distillers' and whiskey tax profits.

Ironically, that money goes right back into treatment of substance abuse patients, which served 21,000 people in treatment programs back in 2014.

29 percent of those had alcohol abuse problems.

It's something the Department of Mental Health can't do without, especially in tough economic times.

"Some of our funds come through taxes on particular products, such as products, or contracts, or tobacco, or alcohol, and when sales go up, then revenues come in or are a little better, incremental, so I'd say a good bit of our revenue has grown the same time as inflation, but the services have outgrown that by much more," says Perdue.

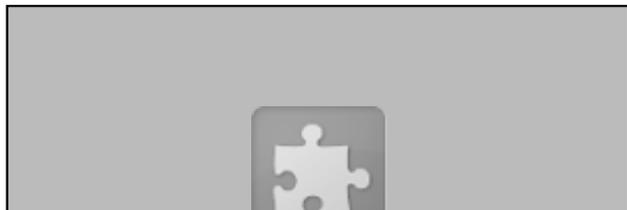
Their patient level has increased, too, but the number of state run facilities has been cut from 7 down to just 3.

Waiting lists continue to grow as well, and commissioner Jim Perdue doesn't see it decreasing anytime soon, without the help of the state.

"It's going to take money. For us to get the waiting list down, it's going to take money," Perdue says.

This year, Governor Bentley has requested the agency's funding from the general fund to stay the same as last year's, even though the department asked for a big increase, of \$58 million.

It remains to be seen what the legislature will do when it comes time to approve the budget.



Megan Wiebold

