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Department of Mental Health provides help to mentally challenged, mentally ill

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By **Carrie Brown McWhorter**

September 17, 2015

Unless you or a loved one receives services provided by the Alabama Department of Mental Health (ADMH), you may not know much about the agency's work. However, there are thousands in Alabama for whom these services are a lifeline, according to Jim Perdue, ADMH commissioner. And significant budget cuts would hit those individuals and their families hard.

"Our services are very broad ranging, so cutting services would cut into the communities we serve," he said.

ADMH serves those who are struggling with mental illness ranging from depression to psychotic behavior as well as those born with intellectual or developmental disability. ADMH operates several residential homes throughout the state and oversees the care of those who are incarcerated because they were found guilty by reason of insanity.

ADMH programs

According to the agency's 2013 annual report, approximately 200,000 Alabamians received direct services through the various programs of ADMH. Those numbers include services to patients in nursing homes, residents of group homes, adolescents seeking mental health therapy and addicts in substance abuse programs.

Perdue said the department reaches all 67 counties and almost every community in Alabama.

"But we're still underserving those in need," he said. "There's a large number of people with intellectual disabilities that are waiting to be served and many others who need services."

Information provided by the governor's office after the end of the Legislature's regular session in May said the severe budget cuts proposed by the Legislature could result not only in a loss of services but also in the loss of jobs. The report said approximately 2,000 people with intellectual disabilities would lose their supported employment and day-program support. As a result, family members could lose or be forced out of their jobs because of the increased responsibility of caring for their loved ones. The report also said more than 1,000 community mental health center employees throughout Alabama could lose their jobs.

Like other state departments the ADMH budget receives funds from several state and federal sources. The primary state-level funding mechanism for the department is Alabama's Mental Health Fund, which receives revenue from certain taxes on cigarettes, public utilities, distillers and whiskey sales and insurance premiums. The fund also receives annual appropriations from the state General Fund and the Education Trust Fund.

However, more than half of the agency's money comes from the federal government, which is why even a 5 percent cut to the ADMH budget could hurt services.

"We get federal funds that are matched to our state funds, sometimes as much as 2.5 times state funds," Perdue said. "A 5 percent cut would represent a little more than \$5 million to our annual budget, but when you match that with federal funds, it could be as much as \$17 million in reduction because we would lose our match. That's where we would see the largest effect."

Potential cuts

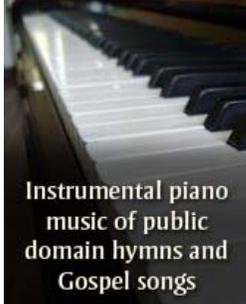
According to information from Gov. Robert Bentley's office, a \$35.2 million cut in state funds to ADMH could result in another \$64 million in federal matching funds loss for a total loss of \$99 million to the agency's budget for the upcoming fiscal year. In an Aug. 3 comment on Twitter, Bentley mentioned potential cuts to mental health services and said he has heard from many Alabamians who don't want to see those cuts.

If the Legislature follows through with the proposed cuts, Perdue believes state mental health employees will do the best they can with the resources they have.

"The Department of Mental Health is comprised of very passionate and compassionate



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people. They don't just work for mental health because they need a job, they do it because they have a passion," he said.

"We'll be more effective with more money, but we're going to do everything we can to provide every service we can. The mission of Mental Health will remain the same regardless of the money."



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