

Advocates, clients rally for state mental health funding

By Alexis Barton, abarton@annistonstar.com | Posted: Monday, May 11, 2015 6:30 pm

OXFORD — More than a hundred people Monday voiced concerns over potential cuts in the state mental health budget at a rally sponsored by a local nonprofit.

The rally at the Oxford Civic Center was organized by the Arc of Calhoun and Cleburne Counties, which provides services and advocacy for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

“This is not something that affects nameless, invisible people. It is very, very obvious that we are not voiceless, that we are not invisible,” said the Arc’s board vice president Mike Abrams.

Rally attendee Teresa Cofield said mental health services had saved her life.

“For the past few years I’ve had a really hard time, and my counselors know what I’m going through,” she said.

“If it hadn’t been for the mental health center, and my family and friends, I would’ve already committed suicide.”

Eleven rallies were planned around the state, with another planned in Etowah County for later Monday afternoon. The rallies were in response to a proposed \$35 million loss in funding for the Department of Mental Health, one of several cuts proposed to fix the state’s 2016 budget gap.

“Individuals in Montgomery say the legislators are not hearing from individuals with these needs,” Arc executive director Tammy Moreno said. “We want your voices to be heard.”

Abrams agreed.

“There’s some 150 people here today who desperately need the funds that are appropriated by the Legislature,” Abrams said. “We are important. All of us have value, and we need to make sure that the politicians find a way to fund our programs.”

Several members of the audience shouted “Don’t close us down!” and “Keep it open!” during the rally. Several people shared their personal experiences with mental health and urged for funding for services to continue.



Voicing support

Lisa Warl holds signs Monday at a rally to support continued funding for the programs of the Alabama Department of Mental Health Programs.

Anniston resident Charles J. Lee said without access to mental health care he'd be lost and out on the street.

"Many people in the Calhoun County area can't get the assistance they need," he said. "We don't need this budget cut to come between mental health and people that are seeking help."

Lindsay Baucom, board member and secretary at the Jacksonville chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, also spoke.

"We're not going down without a fight," she said.

Baucom said people who seek care at local hospitals are released a short time after being admitted and there is a shortage of available beds.

"Where will people go when they are released?" Baucom said. "Some people don't have resources or family members to take care of them."

No elected officials spoke to those assembled in Oxford, but Rep. Randy Wood, R-Calhoun County, addressed concerns by telephone Monday afternoon.

"We know people need assistance and that's our job, to see they get it," he said. "We will do our best to see they get it."

Wood said House legislators had worked on the bill and felt they had a "pretty decent budget" that would fund agencies.

"If everything goes like it should we'll be in good shape. I think we're going to be OK," he said. "There won't be any excess money left, but we'll be able to get by for 2016 and hopefully 2017 won't be as severe as 2016."

Moreno said advocates for mental health care understand that many state agencies are worried about their budgets

"We know this is a very difficult time with little money and lots of needs," Moreno said. "There are agencies that are in need of funding, but we need to make our voice heard and this is how we do it, by coming together and sharing our concerns."