

# Where do we now go from here?

Posted: Friday, July 15, 2016 2:43 pm

Where do we go from here? That is one of the questions Jim Perdue, commissioner of mental health for Alabama and others shared during a recent town hall meeting at the Gadsden Museum of Art.

“This is the reason I am here,” said Perdue. “If I was emperor and could do anything I want, not to mention a few things, they (emperors) don’t have to have the legislature. You guys are doing good at what you are doing with what we have got.”

But there is much more than can be done at both the state and federal levels, Perdue said.

“The first of which is town hall meetings,” said Perdue. “You have been gracious to help and I appreciate you helping to make sure people understand mental health. People know everything about mental health they want to know. And that ain’t very much!”

“Before I can meet in Montgomery and that windstorm of information that occurs for the last year they had 1,200 bills introduced,” said Perdue. “Before I could talk about my budget, I need to make sure they get the message. The message is hard to deliver.”

“I am trying to go to each senate district and catchment area to 310 boards and make sure they understand what the problems are and potential solutions,” said Perdue.

“Message Number One is that we have 900 people working out of the 1,300 people out of the state in Tuscaloosa,” said Perdue. “The management of that organization is in Montgomery.”

“It is hard to manage 900 people when the management is 102 miles away,” said Perdue.

“We need to put everyone on one campus and open those beds in Bryce Hospital,” said Perdue.

“The second plan is prisons,” said Perdue. “We invest or spend about \$12 million a year to a company out of state that comes in and assesses and provides services inside our prisons. There are 25,000 prisoners in Alabama. Forty percent of those prisoners have either a substance abuse or serious mental illness and that is the reason they are there. Without that they wouldn’t be there.”

“Before they can be treated they are serving time,” said Perdue. “If we hire community mental health centers that already have staff, although they may have to add staff, to go in and assess treatment and go to the judges and ask, we can walk some of these out in a legislatively prescribed manner to where they are not in jail and tell them ‘okay here is what you have got to do. You got to make your appointments, take your drugs, stay away from the bad drugs on the street and hey, then you can stay out and we will get you out early, otherwise you are going back.’”

“We need to invest in our community,” said Perdue. “We also have people who are just like us that are in jails that



## LOCAL ADVOCATE'S INPUT

LOCAL ADVOCATE’S INPUT. Jerry Delk, a local advocate for mentally ill patients, shares her input during a recent town hall meeting at the Gadsden Museum of Art. Delk pointed out some of the major strides that have been made in this area including the addition of telemedicine, Project Lifesaver and others.

are ill. We have people dying of cancer or other diseases. We have people taking them to radiation treatment, chemotherapy. If we could release them just like the others, they are eligible for Medicaid, Medicare and many other benefits they might be missing because of incarceration. Release them and we could help take money and restore services.”

“We could take these Hospice patients and treat them out of jail and use the rent to restore property,” said Perdue.

Jerry Delk, a local advocate for mentally ill patients, shared some of the improvements that have taken place in the Cherokee-Etowah-Dekalb County area that have proven beneficial including telemedicine.

“It has been a great benefit and I want to thank our representatives for helping us get grants,” said Delk.

“That makes all the difference in the world,” said Delk.

Delk also extended her appreciation to local law enforcement for their support of Project Lifesaver, which helps track patients with dementia who may become lost.

“If they get lost we can track them down in a few minutes,” said Delk. “That saves the state a lot of money.”

“Insurance companies, if they will watch our mental patients get stabilized, they need to stay on their medication,” said Delk. “If they could stay on their medicine without changing it would save a lot of money.”

“We have talked many times and we appreciate your input,” said Perdue. “You have great representation, obviously great community support. I applaud you for what you are trying to do.”

Perdue pointed out that our best investment is our children.

On that note, CED is working to reach out to local high schools, said Shelia Hurley, director, CED Mental Health Center, to extend services to students and families in need.

Those in attendance were challenged to answer some key questions regarding mental health services including:

-How important is the need for improved access to high quality mental health services in your community? Most responded very important.

-How important is the necessity for additional services for individuals who are developmental or intellectually disabled?

-How would you rate your community’s awareness that mental illness is a disease and not a weakness of character?

-Rate the readiness of your community to handle individuals with mental illness: 1. Well Prepared 2. Somewhat prepared. 3. Not prepared. 4. Don’t know.

Overall indications, according to reports, was that the CED catchment area has good resources at its disposal, although there is always room for improvement.

“This commissioner having been a probate judge understands the issues we brought up here today,” said Hurley. “He has a group forming to work on bed availability so we can work on access. Our hospitals are very interested.”

Also recognized for its continued support and representation was NAMI Centre. NAMI Representative Sue Guffey said they are working to start a NAMI affiliate in Etowah County.

The Etowah County Circuit actually has a mental health court to focus on the needs of those individuals with mental illness who are drawn into the criminal court system to divert them to programs that are more appropriate than the

average criminal case that comes through the court system.

“You are all family,” said Etowah County Probate Judge Bobby Junkins. “That guy is the first person I have been with in 30 years that has involved mental health like he has. Mrs. Shelia Hurley does a good job, but her foot soldiers are here. Our judges work together with the sheriff’s department, Dr. Shehi and Dr. Pruitt. I think people want to do what is right for mental health. We know what is right we just have to have some money to do it. I don’t understand why we are not getting four to one Medicaid but all these folks work close together and we appreciate it. It is not just a few hours a day job, it is around the clock. That is part of the territory.”