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Mental Healthcare of Cullman building new 16-bed facility

By *Tiffany Owens*

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— Construction on a new 16-bed residential facility for patients committed for psychiatric treatment will begin later this year on a site off Mitchell Road.

The facility that Mental Healthcare of Cullman is building will be one of four new centers in north central Alabama, with three others going up in Huntsville, Jasper and Anniston, said Chris Van Dyke, executive director of Mental Healthcare of Cullman. The Cullman facility will hold patients that would have otherwise been sent to the North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur, he said.

“We hope to begin moving dirt within the next week or so and have it finished up by May 2014,” Van Dyke said.

The project is budgeted to cost roughly \$1.5 million, and Mental Healthcare was awarded a \$700,000 state grant to put towards it, he said. A final figure for construction costs has not yet been determined because the project has just been let for bids. Leonard Design in Cullman designed the facility which includes offices, patient rooms, kitchen, commons area, secured fencing outside and a storm shelter.

Van Dyke said the new facility will be a secure locked group home for patients that have been court-ordered to continue psychiatric treatment. Mental health advocates believe patients often get better care in smaller, less isolating facilities.

The new facility is an example of how the Alabama Department of Mental Health is shifting away from large mental hospitals to smaller group homes which officials say are less expensive and give patients more freedom.

Since the 1990s, Alabama has closed 10 other mental health treatment centers. Last year, in the wake of deep budget cuts — 36 percent slashed between 2009 and 2012 — the Department of Mental Health closed Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon and Greil Montgomery Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery.

The North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur and Tuscaloosa’s Bryce Hospital, Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility and Mary S. Harper Geriatric Psychiatric Center all remain open.

Community-based programs can receive federal matching funds as high as 30 percent. Because no federal funds are available for state mental hospitals, those institutions operate entirely on state funds.

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