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Mentally ill inmates trapped in 'vicious cycle,' says Morgan sheriff

By Ashley Remkus Staff Writer Updated 2 hrs ago

Some people in north Alabama who suffer from mental illness are in and out of county jails as part of a "vicious cycle," a county sheriff said.

Just last week, 87 people with a history of mental health problems were detained in Morgan County Jail, where the bill for psychiatric drugs is about \$1,500 per month and as much as half the staff deals with mentally ill patients, records show.

The jail averages about 400 inmates.

The mentally ill inmates are jailed on charges ranging from murder to misdemeanors, and each has, at some point, required individual supervision from one or more guards, Morgan County Sheriff Ana Franklin said.

Mentally ill inmates who potentially are a danger to themselves or others may be taken to Decatur Morgan Hospital, where they remain under the supervision of an armed guard, or they can be housed in a single-cell observation unit at the jail.

With the average wait for a trial in felony cases at more than a year, many of those patients are jailed for extended periods.

"We aren't psychiatrists; we're law enforcement," Franklin said. "But we're having to house these people, and we can't even force them to take the medication that will make them better."

Of the 22 guards assigned to each shift at the jail, sometimes 10 are dealing specifically with mentally ill inmates, who also may be housed in a special dorm for those with behavioral problems.

Mentally ill inmates have access to counselors every day, a psychiatric nurse twice a week and a psychiatrist once every two months.

“But even if we get them straight and on their medication, the problem is they lose all their government services, like Social Security, Medicaid, other welfare, when they become incarcerated,” Franklin said. “Many of them are indigent or not working, and when they get out of jail it can take months to get those services resumed.”

Franklin said that creates a “revolving door” of incarceration when the patients go untreated and end up committing crimes again.

“It’s a vicious cycle,” she said.

The large number of mentally ill inmates is in part a result of the closing of mental health treatment facilities across the state and locally, including most recently the shuttering of North Alabama Regional Hospital. Local and state funding for such facilities has been cut or eliminated, in part to save on expenses.

While access to counseling services is still available for mental health patients in the area, treatment by psychiatrists, who are certified to make diagnoses and prescribe medications, is hard to find, said Sue Brantley, director of the Morgan County Mental Health Association.

Some patients, who have insurance and a family doctor willing to work with a counselor, can get their medications from those health care providers.

“But if somebody is very mentally ill, most family doctors won’t prescribe those strong psychiatric drugs for things like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia,” Brantley said.

Inmates suffering from severe mental illness can be committed to the Alabama Department of Mental Health for treatment pending trial, “but it requires a lot of things to be proven with evidence,” Morgan County Circuit Judge Steven Haddock said.

For an inmate to be committed, evidence must show treatment is needed to prevent a deterioration of the person's health and that the inmate poses a "substantial risk of harm" to himself or others, Haddock said.

If those elements are proved during a hearing and an evaluation by a mental health professional confirms them, a circuit judge can order the inmate be treated at Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility. The Tuscaloosa facility is one of two state-operated mental hospitals that remain open.

The wait time for a hearing and evaluation, however, can be six to nine months, Franklin said.

"By then, we've already had them in our custody all that time, and there's no guarantee they can be placed in a bed right away," she said.

Haddock said the treatment can be used for the person to gain competency to stand trial, or just to improve the inmate's mental health.

State mental health officials are planning a town hall meeting in Decatur this month as part of a tour across Alabama to discuss problems like those law enforcement face in Morgan County.

Terry Mitchell, the Department of Mental Health's public information officer, said the meeting will address topics including funding for treatment and the effects of incarceration on mentally ill inmates. The meeting's location, date and time have not been announced.

ashley.remkus@decaturdaily.com or 256-340-2443. Twitter @aremkus1.