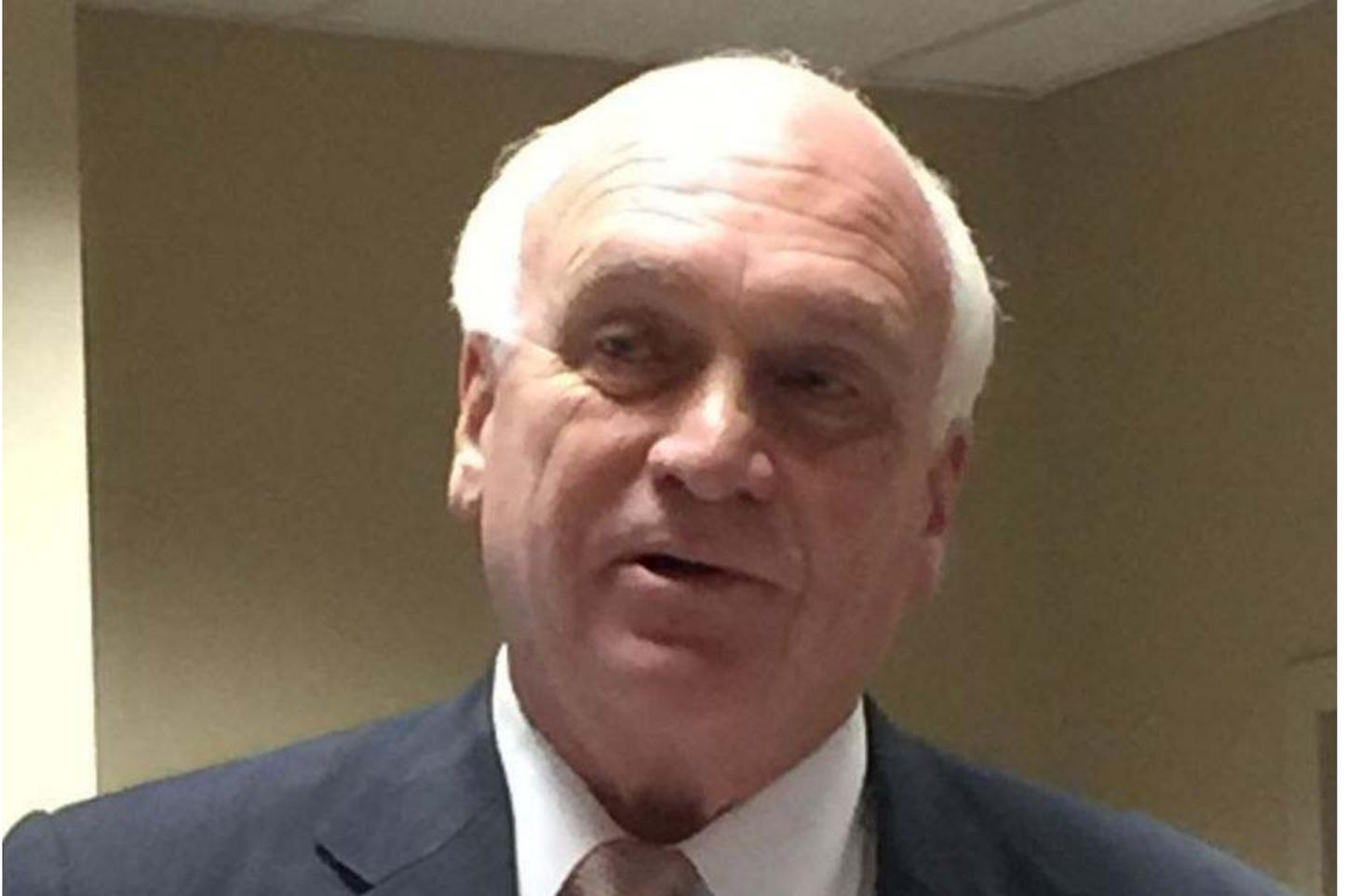


http://www.decaturdaily.com/news/morgan_county/decaturn/local-parents-ask-for-public-ratings-of-group-homes/article_6a3eaeca-746b-5541-8d61-fd30b0f2385d.html

FEATURED

Local parents ask for public ratings of group homes

By Bayne Hughes Staff Writer Updated 8 hrs ago



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James Perdue

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Two Decatur parents asked state Mental Health Commissioner James Perdue for better group home ratings and more notice of pending closures during his visit to Decatur on Wednesday.

They did not leave the meeting satisfied.

Suzanne Johnson and Jennifer Chase, parents of two group home residents who are developmentally disabled, said they were concerned after Perdue's town hall meeting at the Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama that the state Department of Mental Health is more

interested in protecting group home providers than in protecting the disabled clients.

Perdue also told Mayor-elect Tab Bowling that he would be willing to work with the city on the use of the Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama's request for a \$30,000 city allocation.

Chase told Perdue she received 12 hours' notice in April before the state shut down the group home on Diane Street Southwest, where her daughter was living.

Chase said her daughter was happy and she was pleased with her care, so they were unaware the group home was even possibly facing closure.

Her daughter has adjusted well to the new home, but Chase said she lives in fear she will be blindsided again after the traumatic experience.

"We need to know when a group home receives a low rating," Chase said.

Johnson's daughter wasn't involved in the closure of nine group homes in Decatur, but she said the state Department of Mental Health's website doesn't include ratings or grades of the licensed group homes.

This prompted Johnson to unsuccessfully call Perdue's department.

"They weren't allowed to tell us or direct us to the good homes," Johnson said. "It was like they didn't want to be responsible."

Perdue said some people want a rating system for group homes similar to the health ratings for restaurants, but it's not that simple, especially when there's a shortage of group providers.

"Ratings can be misleading," Perdue said. "A restaurant can get a 97, but you've still got a problem if you find a fly in your soup."

Perdue said it's important to make sure the ratings "don't cause undue alarm. We also need to maintain the privacy of the individual provider."

Perdue admitted his department needs to do a better job of managing the group home providers.

This includes making sure they follow rules like not hiring convicted felons and not allowing medication to be left unlocked in the refrigerator, he said.

The Mental Health Center's request for the city allocation has been a controversial issue since the

City Council cut the funding in 2014 as part of budget reductions. The center's last allocation was \$28,000 in 2013.

The council refused to add the allocation back in the fiscal 2016 and 2017 budgets.

However, Bowling made funding the center's request a campaign issue in the municipal election in which he was elected mayor on Oct. 4. At least two of the newly elected council members also have said they support adding the Mental Health Center's request to the new budget.

Bowling asked Perdue to help the Decatur mental health center get a match to a city allocation through the federal Medicaid program. He believes the \$28,000 match would create almost \$94,000 for the center.

"A long-term healthcare facility isn't an option, but that would be a lot of money to add to the bucket and help more people," Bowling said.

Perdue said he doesn't want to micromanage the local Mental Health Center, but putting the allocation up for the federal match creates federal government oversight that might not be worth the trouble.

New Mental Health Center Executive Lisa Coleman said her center would keep a city allocation local to help indigent Decatur residents with psychiatric care. She said it's hard to say how many patients an allocation would help because the cost varies with the amount of care required for each patient.

Coleman said her center would need permission from Perdue on the state level to submit the city allocation for the potential Medicaid match.

"It's a very complicated process," Coleman said.

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