

Ozark residents rally against mental health funding cuts

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OZARK – Cutting mental health funding by more than \$35 million in Alabama would not just mean fewer services and staff for residents with mental health needs throughout the state, Vivian B. Adams School Director Hannah Parker said.

For Parker, a drop in funds to the state Department of Mental Health would also mean employment losses for caregivers who would likely have to quit their jobs and care for their loved ones because of a decline in services. It would also mean more people with mental health issues would be without services to help them cope or function, which could result in more problems in law enforcement.

The points were among several that Parker, mental health workers and parents of children with special needs sought to bring to the surface during a legislative rally held at Vivian B. Adams on Monday evening. The rally was one of about eight held around the state on Monday in hopes of retaining the Medicaid waivers that currently help fund day treatment and other programs in mental health.

A statement from Gov. Robert Bentley's office stated that Alabama legislators are proposing eliminating \$35.2 million in state funds from the mental health budget. The cut would result in a loss of \$64 million in matching federal funds, which would make the loss to mental health more like \$99 million, according to Bentley's office.

An alternative to the funding could be tax increases. Bentley said in the statement he is "committed to finding new revenue" so that "state agencies can continue to provide essential services."

Ed Dorsey, executive director of Vaughn-Blumberg in Dothan, said a goal on Monday was to encourage residents to continue to contact their local legislators about the mental health funding concerns.

"Without funding, the challenges will be too much to overcome," Dorsey said.

According to Dorsey, a total of 5,800 residents in Alabama receive help through mental health programs in the state. More than 3,000 are on a waiting list. About 300 are added to services annually, Dorsey said.

An al.com report said the mental health budget has been about \$104 million annually for the last several years since losing more than a third of its budget between 2009 and 2012.

While Parker said Vivian B. Adams would likely remain open after potential funding cuts, she said the school would likely lose staff and consumers.

Multiple mental health workers attended the event, including Dan Zapata, development disabilities director at the East Central Mental Health Center in Troy.

Zapata said he has attended rallies before.

“Mental health funding is something we can’t just repair – it has got to be fixed,” he said.

Alabama Rep. Steve Clouse, R-Ozark, was the only local state representative to attend the rally in Ozark.

Clouse said legislators are continuing to search for methods to address the budget.

“I’m going to carry your message to Montgomery, and I thank you all for all you do,” he said.

That message, according to parents like Diane Kautz, was to not take the “happiest place on earth” in her daughter’s life away for the sake of improper funding.

“My daughter started here when she was 23 months old,” she said.

“We moved to Central Alabama and didn’t have the services that we have here. I’m glad we’re back. I hope they will try to build even more schools like Vivian B. Adams.”