

Meeting to address mental health cuts

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As legislators in Montgomery debate how to best remedy a deficit in the state's General Fund, Gov. Robert Bentley has criss-crossed the state in an effort to shore up support for his plan to raise \$541 million in revenue via tax increases.

Bentley was in Mobile Monday to discuss how the budget crisis would affect the state Department of Mental Health if the Legislature decides to slash the budget as opposed to raising taxes.

“We are facing a tremendous crisis in our General Fund Budget that will impact every Alabama County if not addressed by the Legislature,” Bentley said during his appearance. “I am committed to finding new revenue so our state agencies can continue to provide essential services to Alabamians. For decades, we have failed to address the way our non-education state agencies are funded. With no one-time money available to support the General Fund and debts that are owed, we have a real crisis on our hands. I encourage Alabamians to let their elected representatives know that these cuts are unacceptable.”

Faced with the prospect of crippling cuts to services in North Alabama, a public meeting will be held at 6 p.m. Thursday, May 21, at the Decatur Utilities meeting facility, 1002 Central Parkway SW, Decatur.

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the current state of mental health in north-central Alabama and how it would be affected by legislative cuts to the 2016 budget.

Presenters will include officials from the Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama, Mental Health Association in Morgan County, Foundation for Mental Health, Alabama Council of Community Mental Health Boards, Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, judicial representatives, law enforcement representatives and other stakeholders.

How services would be affected

Bentley's outlook on how mental health services would be affected by deep legislative cuts is grim. His office projected that more than 24,000 Alabamians with mental illness will either lose services or experience reductions in services.

He estimated other possibilities, including:

- 589 consumers would lose residential services (group homes, supported housing, MOM apartments, etc.);
- 4,840 consumers would lose intensive outpatient services (case management, in-home intervention, assertive community treatment, day treatment, partial hospitalization programs, peer services, etc.);
- 16,274 consumers would lose routine outpatient services (individual and group therapy, family counseling, psychiatric services, medications, etc.);

- 2,598 consumers would be unable to access psychiatric stabilization services (crisis residential units, psychiatric inpatient units, etc.);
- 1,080 community mental health center employees in various counties would lose their jobs;
- Closure of county satellite treatment programs would result in no community mental health services for those counties; and
- \$6 million in federal funding tied to the SAMHSA Mental Health Block Grant would be lost.

Bentley's office speculated cuts could also have the following impacts on Community Intellectual Disability Services:

- Approximately 1,127 people in the current waiver programs would lose their life-sustaining services, and/or;
- Approximately 2,000 people would lose supported employment and day program supports. As a result, many of the family members (an estimated 2,000-plus) of these individuals could lose their jobs because they will have to stay home to care for these individuals;
- All 5,829 individuals who are currently receiving waiver services would lose approximately 21 percent of the services they currently receive;
- A majority of small providers who provide residential and day habilitation programs around the state would go out of business; and
- More than 3,000 individuals currently on the waiting list for waiver services would not receive them.

Local impact

Bill Giguere, foundation development officer for the Mental Health Center of North Alabama, is organizing the May 21 meeting. He urged all Alabamians to contact their legislative representatives in regard to the proposed cuts.

“If the funding cuts go through as prescribed, it will impact what we do,” he said. “It will affect the capacity for housing and it will affect other outpatient services. We’re going to be providing less services, and that’s the reality.”

Finding temporary housing for the state’s mentally ill is already a challenge and one that will only get worse with the closure of the 74-bed North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur by the end of June. That leaves only Bryce Hospital as the state’s only mental health hospital for adults who can’t be treated at crisis stabilization units.

The units have become the preferred method of treating the mentally ill as opposed to larger hospital facilities.

“We’ve gone from four hospitals down to one,” Giguere said. “We have six different housing programs, and those cuts mean that some of the beds will be decreased. There’s no more room at the inn, and there’s

no place left to go.”

Probate Judge Charles Woodroof, who oversees the mental commitment for adults in Limestone County, admits he’s concerned about how mental health cuts could affect housing and other services. He said the overall impact on his office, however, is unknown because he just signs off on commitments. The probate judge is not responsible for finding housing, as that is the job of the mental health officer.

“We’re using outpatient commitment orders more frequently because it allows people to return to their home or a group home and receive outpatient treatment at a facility,” he said. “Ultimately, any cuts will trickle down to (the local) mental health department and will eventually trickle down to us.”

He said cuts to outpatient services could lead to more commitment petitions for adults unable to receive the care they need.

Bentley’s office estimated the cuts would result in \$35.2 million at the state level and a loss of \$64 million in federal matching funds for a total of \$99 million being taken away from mental health services.

Closer to home, Giguere said the cuts would equate to about a \$1 million cut from the Mental Health Center of North Alabama, which is about 20 to 30 percent of the MHCNA’s operating budget.

“We’ve already been cut 40 percent since 2009,” Giguere said. Our operating budget compared to 2011 is 25 percent less. If these cuts go through, we’re still going to get the calls.”