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# Anne Penney retires from East Alabama Mental Health

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*Photo by Robert Noles*

By Morgan Bryce  
Staff Reporter

East Alabama Mental Health executive director Dr. Anne Penney retired after more than 42 years of service last Friday, handing the reins to new director Jamie Herren. Penney said stepping down was a hard decision, but that it would allow her more time to give back to the community.

"I love doing volunteer work and I love being active in the community and I wanted a little more time to be able to do that ... but making the decision was hard because I love the center and the people here so much ... I'm going to miss it," Penney said. A native of Decatur, Ala., Penney came to the Auburn/Opelika area to attend school at Auburn University, earning her master's degree in sociology, with a focus on education.

After graduation, Penney began looking for jobs locally, and found an opening for a community educator at the East Alabama Mental Health Center. The center, founded in 1967, was then located on the corner of Second Avenue and Seventh Street.

"My father had a mental illness, but mental health centers weren't started yet he was diagnosed. He sought private treatment, and did real well," Penney said. "Even though I had that family history, I didn't really know what a mental health center was at the time. But they were looking for somebody who could work in community education and prevention work, and I thought, 'well, that sounds like fun.'"

Beginning her career there in 1974, she said then executive director Dr. Jim Walter served as a mentor and source of encouragement.

"Dr. Jim Walter was my mentor. After I started in that prevention role, he gave me opportunities to advance and to learn about administration," Penney said.

She added that after five or six years of working for EAMH, she would become more involved with administrative work. Not having a deep grasp of the budgeting or legal aspects involved in such work, she told Walter that she needed to go back to school and take classes that would prepare her. She went back to school at Auburn, and received a doctorate degree in administration, which she said was crucial in being able to handle the work for her future executive director position.

In March 1993, the organization relocated to where it is today, located in Tigertown on Lambert Drive.

Over the years, Penney said she served in a number of positions within the

organization, and following Dr. Walter's retirement in 1994, she became the Executive Director, a position she would hold for the next 22 years.

Penney said she loved her job as director for several reasons.

"I think the most enjoyable aspect was watching people recover and live successfully with a mental illness ... that was a true joy," Penney said. "Also, people like Jamie ... and our board of directors, who are volunteers, helped me stay and enjoy being here for 42 years. They really made my job much easier."

The new director, Jamie Herren, a fellow Auburn alumnus and EAMH veteran, has served EAMH for the last 24 years in the finance department serving in all aspects of the Center's accounting and information technology, assisting patients with personal finances and most recently working as the Chief Financial Officer. He said filling the void left by Penney will be difficult, but he is excited about the task.

"I'm real excited about taking on the role. I feel like working with our great staff and leadership team, we'll be able to do a lot for our consumers," Herren said. "There's a lot of challenges ahead, but I'm looking forward to taking them on."

Penney said she believes that Herren will be a great successor.

"Jamie has a wonderful rapport with our consumers. He has had a lot of contact with them, and they respect him," Penney said. "He's going to be a great director for us moving forward."

EAMH, a non-profit public organization, offers services to those with mental illnesses, intellectual disabilities and substance abuse issues. The organization has branches in Lee, Chambers, Russell and Tallapoosa counties. They provide residential treatment, educational programs and a host of other services for those with mental illnesses, intellectual disabilities and substance abuse issues. For more information about the center and its services, visit [www.eastalabamamhc.org](http://www.eastalabamamhc.org).

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