

# Area's mental health advocates and clients "Walk a Mile" for awareness

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, July 30, 2015 12:15 am

FLORENCE — About 200 mental health advocates and clients made the trek Wednesday from the Lauderdale County Courthouse to the Shoals Legislative Office building on Pine Street in a symbolic call for adequate funding from the state.

Walkers carried pairs of shoes to leave on the lawn of the legislative building.

The “Walk a Mile in My Shoes” event, organized by local mental health officials, served a dual purpose: to make the public aware of the critical state of funding, and to highlight the needs of those who’ve been for years on the state’s waiting list desperate for services.

One such family in attendance Wednesday was Sherry Shelby and her son, Levi Stacy, 23, of Florence.

Shelby, a single parent, said Levi has the mental function of a 6-month-old infant. He has been on the waiting list for day services in the Shoals since 2006, when he was still attending high school special education classes.

The state allows special needs individuals to attend public school until age 21.

Shelby said her son, whom she must tend to like an infant, had attended the local United Cerebral Palsy Center program, where he received free services until age 5, and then he entered the school system.

“I at least knew when he had some socialization that he was happy,” Shelby said. “Since 2013, he’s been sitting at home every day, and he isn’t happy. It breaks my heart because he deserves better from this state.”

Shelby said it’s discouraging knowing that services to residents such as Levi aren’t available strictly because of a lack of state revenue.

“Some days I want to fight, and some days I just want to give up,” Shelby said. “Nobody knows how upsetting it is when the government simply doesn’t acknowledge these residents. I debated even coming here today and bringing him because of the heat, but I had to just to stand and speak for him if nothing else.”



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Several local organizations make the "Walk a mile in My Shoes" march up Pine Street from the Lauderdale County courthouse to the Legislative offices, is an advocacy effort to promote their request for adequate funding for mental health.

Organizations participating in Wednesday's walk included The Arc of the Shoals and Hope Haven Day Center, Scope 310 Authority, Riverbend Center for Mental Health and the United Cerebral Palsy Center in Tuscumbia.

Leaders of those organizations spoke during a short rally on the lawn after walkers arrived at the building. No legislators were present.

Murray Townsend, a mental health advocate and state and local board member for The Arc, said level funding isn't the answer.

"In 16 years, there's been a 4 percent increase in our funding while the cost of living has gone up 41 percent," Murray said. "All that equates to is cuts."

Riverbend Center Director Bryan Libell said he isn't necessarily opposed to Tuesday's news of Gov. Robert Bentley's proposal to un earmark funding to the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

"We've had eight straight years of level funding, which resulted in making cuts," he said. "We've had two reductions in force when we have more people than ever needing services. I'm just asking for an equal playing field. I'm not necessarily opposing un-earmarking."

Bentley is suggesting lawmakers un earmark \$400 million in state funds for five state agencies including mental health. The money would go into the state's General Fund budget.

The Legislature convenes in special session Monday for the purpose of passing a general fund budget.

Scope 310 Director Arvy Dupuy said he hopes the large gathering on the legislative office lawn sends a strong message to Montgomery that "we need adequate, not level ,funding."

"I'm tired of holding the hands of families in need of services and saying, 'I'm sorry, there's nothing we can do to help you.' "

Arc of the Shoals Director Donna Akins said the large turnout Wednesday shows there's great concern. She urged the crowd to send a simple, but clear, message to their legislators.

"Tell them that level funding isn't adequate. After all, they aren't living off of their paychecks from 1997 like we're expected to do," she said.