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Jail: No place for the mentally ill

Robert Palmer Aug 7, 2016

The issue

Increasingly, law enforcement officials are finding they are not only the front line in dealing with people with mental illnesses, but are providing the holding facilities in the form of jails for people who have been spurned by the state of Alabama.

Morgan County Sheriff Ana Franklin probably didn't sign up to be a mental health officer when she ran for office, but she and her deputies find themselves spending more time caring for and housing people with mental illnesses.

She's not alone. With cuts in state funding and the closure of several mental health facilities around Alabama, including one in Decatur, police officers and deputies are being forced into a job they are not prepared for, nor should have to perform.

"We are not psychiatrists; we're law enforcement," Franklin said recently. "But we're having to house these people, and we can't even force them to take the medication that will make them better."

Often, half of Franklin's jail staff is dealing with inmates suffering from mental illnesses. There is nowhere, except in the most extraordinary cases, the inmates can be taken for treatment. And officers have few outside resources to call upon to help these inmates. Certainly, those suffering from mental illness aren't going to respond well in a jail.

Mentally ill inmates have access to a counselor daily, a psychiatric

nurse twice a week, and a psychiatrist once every two months.

Complicating inmate access to mental health services is the loss of access to government services.

“They lose all their government services, like Social Security, Medicaid, other welfare, when they become incarcerated,” Sheriff Franklin said. “Many of them are indigent or not working, and when they get out of jail it can take months to get those services resumed.”

Alabama is failing miserably on almost every government services front, and mental health care is a glaring example of the unwillingness of lawmakers to raise revenue to solve problems.

Instead of confronting the reality of a failed and broken tax system, the Legislature has raided trust funds and legal settlement funds to patch state budgets.

That’s not working, and now, Gov. Robert Bentley is proposing a lottery to help close funding gaps. That won’t solve the underlying problems.

With regular mental health treatment and proper medication, many of the men and women who find themselves incarcerated for petty crimes would live more productive, law-abiding lives. But until lawmakers show some compassion and concern for their fellow human beings, nothing is going to change, and that is criminal.

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