

Department of Mental Health Commissioner says change is needed for those suffering from mental illnesses

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DECATUR, Ala. - The Department of Mental Health Commissioner is calling town

hall meetings all across the state. The theme of these meetings are about bringing awareness to the problems within the state, in hopes to gain support to help change them.

"In town hall meetings I'm trying to elevate the awareness of the problems," said Commissioner Jim Perdue. There are three state-run mental health facilities, all in Tuscaloosa, with not near enough beds for the population that need treatment. "Beds is a problem, waiting lists are a problem across the state," said Perdue.

And when you have a restricted number of beds, "You have to treat the worst of the worst. When they're stabilized, and have reached a level of treatment, they're stable enough to return to the community," said Perdue. "The longest someone can be kept in a facility is 150 days. But the truth is, now people are kept really less than two weeks."

Which helps them get to more patients, but also, at times, creates a revolving door of service.

But the growing problem, is the amount of people that got to jail, because of the lack of treatment for their mental illness.

"We have turned the jail system into the de facto delivery for mental illness. And that's awful," said Perdue.

"Quite frankly many jails are not prepared, able or staffed to do," said Morgan County Sheriff Ana Franklin.

Franklin says she has an excess of 80 inmates in the county jail today that suffer from mental illness. "We're having to pay, and treat as best as we can, while they're in jail."

And it's something department of Perdue says he wants to change- and quick. He says the Department of Corrections out-sources millions of dollars' worth of mental health services to an out of state company. Perdue wants to that changed, and

the money be given to the states mental health department.

"And have employees that work for the centers, go in and assess and treat. The advantage of that is, once someone is ever released, the same person treating them inside, will also treat them outside," said Perdue.

Lessening the chance they'll return to the facility. He wants to take it a step farther though, by designing a furlough system that would help remove people from prisons, that are there because they're mentally ill, qualifying them for health benefits, getting them inserted into a facility, and out of jail.

"We can't continue to treat people in a prison setting," said Perdue.

Perdue says community members are the best and biggest lobbyists for change. He says voicing your concerns to state government officials will help bring that forth.



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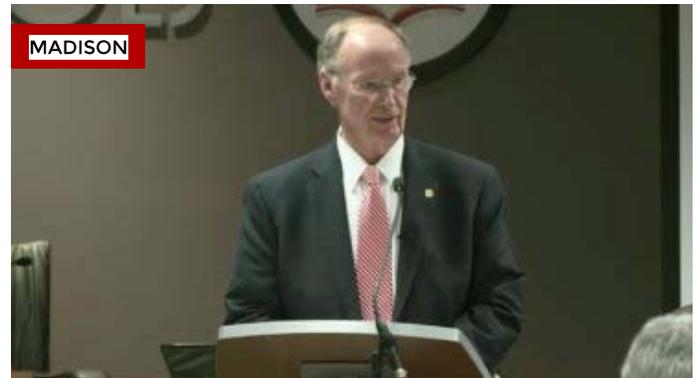
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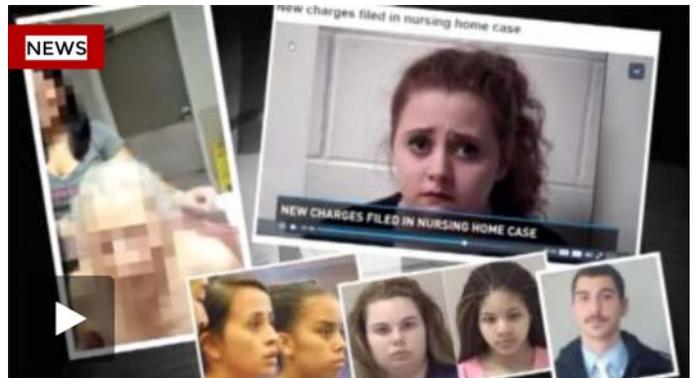
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