

The Anniston Star

Budget cuts could force mental health facility to take on more patients

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07.19.12 - 03:00 am

State budget cuts should not affect services at the local mental health department, but they might lead to a higher patient burden at the facility.

Due to cuts to the state General Fund, the Alabama Department of Mental Health faces a \$32.5 million deficit. Department officials say a plan to shut down two state mental health hospitals will offset the majority of that deficit and potentially stave off cuts at county mental health offices. However, once the hospitals are shut down, the patients there will possibly be turned over to local agencies such as the Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health Center, increasing the burden on those facilities.

“It’s possible we will see more patients,” said Mickey Turner, executive director of the Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health Center. “It could be a burden on our center if they need residential care ... we wouldn’t have a place for them.”

Earlier this year, the Department of Mental Health announced it would shut down Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon and Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery due to budget constraints. Jeff Shackelford, public information officer for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, said what to do with the patients once the hospitals close is still under discussion.

“While we plan to close two hospitals, the state will have other mental health hospitals open,” Shackelford said. “However, our department does understand fewer hospitals mean more dependence on the community.”

Turner said a significant increase in patients could push his facility beyond capacity. The county mental health department includes a 14-bed facility. It serves approximately 6,000 people through its three divisions that treat the mentally ill, substance abusers and the developmentally disabled. Various programs are handled under those three divisions.

Alabama Arise, a non-partisan group that advocates for low-income residents, is wary of the state’s decision to close the hospitals.

“Community-based mental health care could help people lead happier, more independent lives, but we have to fund those services adequately so they can do their jobs,” said Chris Sanders, policy analyst for Alabama Arise. “If Alabama closes mental health hospitals and then underfunds the services that replace them, we’ll be doing a huge disservice to many of our most vulnerable residents and their families.”

Rosemary Blackmon, executive vice president of the Alabama Hospital Association, said her agency has been working with the Mental Health Department to ensure the patients from the two closing hospitals get the help they need and do not end up in emergency rooms for treatment.

“If the community resources are there to support these patients then it should be okay but if not, they’ll end up in emergency rooms,” Blackmon said. “Emergency rooms are where the most cost is for hospitals and they are not the best place for those patients.”

Shackelford notes, however, that the closing of the hospitals will offset the majority of \$32.5 million deficit, preventing county offices like Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health from needing to cut services or employees.

“We may have to put in cuts in other places, but we don’t know where those would be right now,” Shackelford said. “But for right now the local offices ... they should not be affected.”

Turner said he was still uncertain if his department would be unaffected. However, he noted that any decrease in funding now could hurt his facility since it has been several years since funding has increased.

“Sure, we’re worried there could be layoffs,” Turner said. “If we don’t experience the same level of funding like we have in previous years, there could be layoffs or cuts to services.”

Turner said what is really troubling is that the current deficit estimates are dependent on voters approving a state constitutional amendment on Sept. 18 to shore up the state general fund by taking approximately \$200 million from the Alabama Trust Fund.

“If that doesn’t pass, the budget will be a lot worse,” Turner said.

Shackelford said failure to pass the amendment would result in a 17 percent cut to the budget of the state Mental Health Department.

“There is no written plan for where that cut would be,” Shackelford said. “The reality is that a 17 percent cut will not be good for anybody.”