

As state grapples with mental health lawsuits, more funding could be on the way

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Sen. Del Marsh speaks on the floor of the Senate. (Mickey Welsh/The Montgomery Advertiser via AP)
(Mickey Welsh)

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The proposed budget could include an additional \$13 million for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, according to lawmakers who spoke Thursday at a conference organized by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

The increase comes as the department faces a lawsuit over long waits for people who have been found not guilty by reason of insanity. Often, patients must wait in jail for several months before they can be transferred to the state hospital for criminal defendants, where they receive treatment instead of incarceration.

"We would love to have more," said Lynn Beshear, Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health. "We will have very specific things to use that money for."

The potential increase is less than the \$90 million sought by advocates, but more than the department has received since large budget cuts hit between 2009 and 2012. The legislative liaison for NAMI, Graham Champion, said the funds will be included in Gov. Kay Ivey's proposed budget, which must then be approved by both houses of the legislature.

"You'll see very healthy increases for mental health in both those budgets," said Senate Majority Leader Del Marsh (R-Anniston). "The speaker and I will work to keep them there."

Speaker of the House Mac McCutcheon (R-Huntsville), said a recent ruling that the state has not provided adequate care for prisoners with mental illness could prompt the state to improve care in the community.

"I think that that will be a springboard for the state to move forward on mental health," McCutcheon said.

NAMI held its summit days after legislators heard that prisons may have to spend \$80 million to comply with the 2017 ruling. At least 3,000 inmates in Alabama state prisons have a diagnosed mental illness. Last year, U.S. District Court Judge Myron Thompson ruled they haven't received adequate treatment.

"If we don't invest in community services, we are going to spend the money somewhere," said James Tucker, executive director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program. "Alabama is not a wealthy state. We have a limited number of dollars. How are we going to spend those dollars?"

Mental health advocates said services have been underfunded for years. State officials cut more 30 percent from the mental health budget between 2009 and 2012, according to a NAMI report, and closed several state-run psychiatric hospitals. State leaders also declined to expand Medicaid for low-income Alabamians, which could have provided coverage for some adults struggling with mental illness. Last year, NAMI advocates also requested \$90 million to reduce long waits for beds in the remaining hospitals and to improve preventive services.

The shortages have shifted some of the burden of intervention and treatment onto the criminal justice system.

"In many ways, we have made mental illness a crime in this country," said Steve Leifman, a judge in Miami.

Beshear said Alabama struggles with a shortage of mental health workers. The state has fewer psychiatrists per capita than any other state in the country, she said.

"We need to identify the best that we have and support them," Beshear said. "Psychiatry is hard work."


Speakers from NAMI stressed the importance of training for law enforcement and correctional officers who often deal with people in crisis. Montgomery County Sheriff Derrick Cunningham spoke about efforts his department has made to improve care for mentally ill inmates. A program provides medication and appointments for inmates upon discharge.

Many officers in the department have also received crisis intervention training, which provides training about mental illness and de-escalation strategies.

"Every day we have more than 100 inmates in our jail on medication," Cunningham said. "We spend more than \$3,000 a month on meds."

Jackie Hambrick, whose son was shot and killed by Jefferson County sheriff's deputies in July 2017, said his death might have been avoided if officers had received that training.

"As a mother caught in the jaws of a crisis, I never imagined a nightmare like this could happen to me," she said.



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