

REAL-TIME NEWS FROM AL.COM

## String of suicides shakes retirement home that welcomed adults with mental illness

Updated 7:04 AM;

Posted 7:00 AM



Three suicides occurred at Mount Royal Towers, a senior living facility that also houses people with mental illness(Amy Yurkanin|ayurkanin@al.com)

**By Amy Yurkanin, [ayurkanin@al.com](mailto:ayurkanin@al.com)**

Larry Pledger left a boot print on the nightstand before he jumped from his ninth-floor bedroom at Mount Royal Towers in September.

The 61-year-old resident lived with a roommate in an apartment at the complex designed for seniors perched behind Brookwood Medical Center in the Birmingham suburbs. Mount Royal Towers is a continuing care retirement community, which means the building contains apartments along with assisted-living and nursing home rooms for people with dementia and medical needs. Its website describes it as "A full-service senior community providing care for life." Owners and employees of Mount Royal Towers did not return calls or emails for this story.

Pledger, however, was not a senior. He was younger than 65 and diagnosed with schizophrenia, according to an autopsy report. Delusions and paranoia sent him to the psychiatric ward just a few months before he died.

"[Pledger] was last known to be alive ... the night before he was found when, according to his roommate, he had appeared to be agitated and was mumbling," the report said.

He wasn't the only younger resident with mental illness living at Mount Royal Towers that fall. The agency that provides mental health services in Jefferson County assisted nine people with rental payments, according to a November statement from executive director Richard Craig.

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The rental arrangement emerged during a massive transformation of the mental health system in Alabama that closed most state-run psychiatric hospitals and replaced those beds with a plan for community-based care, meaning outpatient care and group homes where it is difficult to secure a spot.

But communities have struggled to provide adequate housing. Local hospitals and mental health clinics now provide much of the care for people with serious mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.


In some cases, families and mental health agencies have turned to housing complexes and nursing homes designed for seniors. The Associated Press in 2009 identified

Alabama as one of the five states with the largest increases in nursing home placements for middle-aged adults suffering from mental illness. Such arrangements often place elderly residents side-by-side with younger adults suffering from serious psychiatric disorders in facilities without services for the mentally ill.

Less than two months after Pledger died, a 41-year-old resident with a history of prescription drug abuse and suicidal thoughts jumped from the 7th floor of Mount Royal Towers. The two deaths followed another suicide in March by a 61-year-old woman who had battled bipolar disorder and lived in independent living.



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At least two other residents attempted suicide in 2017, including one man who stabbed himself and had to be transported to the hospital, according to records from the Vestavia Hills Police Department.

"I can tell you two suicides of people jumping out of windows is really unusual and extraordinary," Craig said.

## **Nowhere else to turn**

Sherrie Ford struggled with mental illness for most of her adult life, a puzzling mix of obsessions and mania that stumped doctors for years. Her son Scott Ford said his mother was so obsessed with cleaning she would wash some of his clothes as soon as they came off.

"When I was a kid, when I came home from school, if I put my shirt on the bed so I could wear a T-shirt to play basketball and I was going to church that night - I'd come back in the house and my shirt would be in the washing machine by itself, running," he said.

Sherrie Ford was hospitalized several times, often at Hillcrest. In 1992, a physician at the hospital found a diagnosis that fit: Bipolar disorder. Sherrie Ford began taking medication.

"At some point, they gave her lithium and she was her old self again," he said.

She worked steadily for years and managed her illness, her son said. Eventually she went on disability for mental illness and moved into an apartment in Boaz designed for those on fixed incomes, Scott Ford said.



In October 2014, she attempted suicide, Ford said. Family members found out she was abusing medication and had prescriptions from at least six different doctors.

She survived the overdose, but suffered from hallucinations and delusions for weeks afterward. Scott Ford said she transferred from the hospital to a rehab facility during her recovery.

"For a good 40 or 50 days, she was talking out of her head, seeing visions, talking to her dad who has been dead for 30 years," Scott Ford said. "My brother and I would go visit and she would be talking to a third person who wasn't even there. And this was not normal for her."

As she regained her faculties, family members started searching for permanent housing in Birmingham. Scott Ford said he called at least 50 facilities, but none would admit residents under the age of 62. Sherrie Ford was 59.

"Somebody somewhere said call Mount Royal Towers," Scott Ford said. "I called them on a Friday at 4 p.m. and I got a call back on Saturday at 10 a.m. And it was just in the nick of time because the rehab was about to put her out. She had come out of the fog. So we didn't know where she was going to go."

Sherrie Ford soon moved in to an apartment she shared with a roommate in independent living. Her disability check covered the costs of rent, meals, utilities and medication management - an optional service offered to some in independent living.

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A resident who lives at Mount Royal Towers and spoke anonymously said most apartment residents at Mount Royal Towers are in their 40s and 50s, and at least one is just 38.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health regulates facilities that provide mental health treatment, and the Department of Public Health inspects nursing homes and assisted-living facilities. Independent living apartments for seniors don't fall into either category and don't receive inspections.

## **No room for the mentally ill**

Alabama's mental health care system has undergone radical changes in the decades since a federal judge ruled that the state failed to care for thousands of patients involuntarily committed to state hospitals. State officials now operate just three psychiatric hospitals in Tuscaloosa - one for seniors, one for criminal defendants and one for adults who have been judged potentially dangerous to themselves or others.

The shift granted freedom to people with mental illness who had been warehoused and often abused inside asylums. Many adjusted well to community-based care, but housing proved to be a struggle. There are not enough beds in group homes for the thousands of patients who may need them, which may push some into boarding homes and homeless shelters.





"Housing is huge," said Lynn Beshear, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health. "In my mind, the crisis care and housing go hand-in-hand. For people who are cycling through jail, prison, ERs, if we don't have housing to discharge them to, that cycle will continue."

James Tucker, director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, said the relationship between Jefferson-Blount-St. Clair Mental Health Authority has lasted for years and worked well for patients in the program. Craig, the executive director of the mental health authority, said none of the suicides occurred among their patients.

"The folks that we have, that we sponsor, we have someone who helps them get to their appointments," Craig said. "We are going to be monitoring them as closely as possible."

Tucker said all patients living independently need to have access to psychiatric care. Mount Royal Towers has a doctor's office on site and a small pharmacy.

"Broadly, just because you're in a community setting, you should have access to counseling," Tucker said.

## **A deadly disease**

Scott Ford said his mother had a rocky start at Mount Royal Towers but eventually settled in. She missed having a car and the ability to come and go where she pleased and complained about messy roommates. However, he said nurses kept her stable on medication, and she settled in after six months.



"She was healthier for that year and a half, than she had been for 10 years prior," Scott Ford said. "Her mental health was better, her physical health was better and I attribute that to three meals a day, social interaction that was more healthy and the med management. Those things helped tremendously."

Still his mother had ups and downs. In addition to struggling with bipolar disorder, she also suffered from chronic pain and often called him to pick her up from

emergency rooms. During her final week of life, those calls became more frequent. Sherrie Ford received multiple prescriptions for pain, but the nurse in charge of her medication made sure she didn't overdose or mix dangerous drugs, her soon said.

When she overdosed in March 2017, Scott Ford found a bottle that held more than 200 Tylenol pills. Only eight remained. She could have bought them on a group outing to Walmart, he said, and kept them in her apartment without the knowledge of staff members.

The Tylenol overdose poisoned her liver, and Sherrie Ford died on March 10.

Less than six months later, Pledger jumped from the ninth floor. On Oct. 20, 41-year-old Tyler Blake Smith jumped from the seventh floor. He had a history of depression, bipolar disorder and suicide attempts.

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The current resident said owners screwed shut all the windows and asked everyone in independent living to turn over all prescription drugs to nurses, and threatened those who didn't comply with eviction. She said her roommate and many other residents came to Mount Royal Towers from hospital psychiatric wards.

She initially resisted moving into a retirement community, she said. In reality, she said few seniors live on her floor.

"You look on their website and you see happy elderly people," she said. "And that's not how it is at all."

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