

Alabama's mental health system is in shambles



By **Guest Voices**

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The wait before hearing the siren signaling the approach of an ambulance which could rescue your loved one can seem interminable, but it often comes in time to save your family member. Change the organ in medical crisis from a heart to the brain, however, and your loved one may or may not survive the wait to come, but that brain will certainly get sicker while waiting for treatment.

Our brains control our entire bodies, but to do so properly, the brain must be healthy. If the brain is not healthy, all manner of other medical issues can occur within one's body, but most importantly, we may lose judgment, rational thought, and impulse control. Unlike a sick heart, a sick brain gets no ambulance ride to the hospital. A person whose brain is so sick it does not recognize the problem must either be capable of self-help, or his or her medical treatment will depend upon the state, principally through the police and court system. Until the state acts, the family of a person suffering a mental health crisis must wait. Unfortunately, the only current viable mechanism for decreasing that wait time is arrest and jail for having a mental illness.

Obviously, any patient can refuse medical treatment, but, virtually all adults knowingly staring death or serious injury in the face, elect emergency treatment, and adopt the necessary continuing medical treatment necessary to live a relatively healthy life. The significant element in that choice to accept treatment or not is rational thought, an element missing when the brain is critically ill.

People do die because they prefer to think they have heartburn rather than a heart attack, or die of Stage Four cancer because they didn't want to know what caused their pain. To assume, however, as the law does, that a person with a critically sick brain can, nevertheless, rationally decide not to treat his or her sick brain is to accept the concept that a person suffering a mental health crisis will also make a rational decision to be homeless, to commit suicide, or to commit an act leading to an arrest and jail. All of these events are known consequences of a failure to treat mental illness.

Only if the state determines that a loved one is a threat to him or herself or to others does the law then authorize involuntary admission and retention in a hospital for treatment. Thus, the wait for something untoward to happen which will prove the risk of harm and can authorize involuntary hospitalization. In the interim, the brain gets sicker, but the sick individual retains his or her freedom. When he or she is sick enough to act in a manner detrimental to self or others, an arrest for "acting crazy" often precedes hospitalization. At that point, the state's concern for the individual's freedom from treatment immediately changes to jail and total denial of freedom.

Treatment of the brain is most successful when it is given promptly upon initial onset of mental illness. Just like the heart, prompt and early treatment increases the chances of success. Early treatment requires open and well-functioning mental health centers which are fully funded to provide community mental health services. Treatment close to home, early and often is preferable to remote hospitalization, and it is cheaper and matching federal funds apply to community treatment but not hospitalization. Hospitalization, unfortunately, will always be required for crisis treatment or longer term difficult cases. Nevertheless, early treatment works better, cheaper, and has a much higher success rate.

Alabama has not adequately funded its mental health treatment system. The community mental health centers are starved for appropriate funding, Medicaid is currently funded to fail, and we have refused to accept Expanded Medicaid and its ability to provide medical service to many more in need. We are failing to provide adequate community mental health services, and yet, we have a closed a significant number of hospital beds. Thus, it should come as no surprise to anyone that our mental health care system and many sick people and their families are in crisis.

Currently, in the Birmingham area, a person determined by law to be a serious threat to himself or others can wait for many days or even weeks because there are no beds available for urgently needed treatment. The agony family members go through while waiting for treatment for their loved ones, while at the same time trying to keep their loved one alive and/or out of jail is a horror no one would wish on their worst enemy. The pressure on families during a mental health crisis of their family member is enormous. Many families are destroyed in the process, leaving the loved one to fend for him or herself in the future. This process of delayed treatment and long waits occurs every day, and the refusal of Alabama to adequately shoulder its responsibility for the mental health care of its citizens suffering from mental illness is unconscionable.

Theoretically, our mental health system works; in actuality, it is in shambles, despite the incredible effort of so many who work in the system. But, our mental health workers cannot perform the miracles necessary without adequate funding, yet our funding priorities are directed to hospitalization and imprisonment, the most expensive choices available and often the result of having failed to fund a system for early intervention.

Alabama has closed several mental health hospitals, losing critical treatment beds in preference to a community based treatment system, which is, theoretically, a far superior method of treating our loved ones close to home. But, the money saved, which was to be diverted to community treatment was never committed to fully fund community mental health and preventative services and we are left to treat in crisis. Only the state can require mental health treatment or its current, more common replacement, imprisonment, so those critical services must be adequately funded by the state.

Since early treatment is cheaper than hospitalization, and far cheaper than imprisonment, it would seem that the legislature's duty is to adequately fund quality community mental health services.

Mental illness will affect one out of five of all Americans during their lifetime. By choosing to inadequately fund mental health services, the legislature is allowing a significant number of its citizens and voters to receive inferior treatment and expose all to unnecessary crisis and danger.

So, we wait: we wait for the legislature to adequately fund community mental health and Medicaid, we wait for a critical care mental health system which will speed critically ill patients to proper care instead of waiting for the patient to prove he or she is critically mentally ill, and we wait for the possibility that we will become critically mentally ill, not realize it, and sit around facing the real possibility of death or jail with little help from the state. Our legislature squabbles over some of the most infuriatingly unimportant issues in life, while a truly significant number of Alabama citizens with very critically ill minds go without adequate or timely treatment. Surely, the legislature does not think mental illness is only a disease that affects poor people, because it is not. The process for compulsory treatment is in the hands of the state, and is the same process for rich and poor alike.

Yes, the legislature should lead. Yes, they should assure that our state's mental health is adequately protected by adequately funding community mental health, adequate hospital beds and a much better commitment process. The legislature has failed miserably. They vote for inadequate funding, and wait for some magic trick which will allow them to go to the voters proudly proclaiming that they continued to cut taxes regardless of their failure to govern and to protect their own citizens. They wait, and then we wait for things to change.

We can afford to wait no longer. Talk to your legislators about this subject. Do you, as a person who might someday face a mental health crisis, want to go to the hospital in handcuffs, riding in the back of a police car? Even worse, do you want to go to jail for being sick? That is the system we offer for everyone, every day. We can do better; our citizens deserve better. If your legislator wants to wait, you should send him or her home to wait.

We should find legislators who understand the needs for a functioning mental health treatment system, and who have the

courage to lead Alabama to become a mentally healthy state. If we do not, we, the voters are the problem because we continue to accept waiting for a day that will never come.

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