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omments

Some worried that Alabama's shrinking mental health system could shrink more



The old Mount Vernon Arsenal and abandoned grounds of Searcy Hospital have been left in ruins. The site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988, but it seems to have been abandoned since the state shuttered the mental hospital in September 2012. Photo taken Thursday, Oct. 17, 2013, in Mount Vernon, Ala. (Mike Kittrell/mkittrell@al.com) (Mike Kittrell)



By [Amy Yurkanin](#) | ayurkanin@al.com
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 on August 23, 2015 at 9:08 AM

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Probate Judge Sherri Friday holds commitment hearings every week inside a small group therapy room at UAB's Center for Psychiatric Medicine.

On a recent Thursday, one of the patients folded and unfolded a stack of papers and bounced her knee up and down. She had been diagnosed with schizophrenia, and had been responding to treatment. There was just one problem, her psychiatrist said. She didn't always take her pills.

Judge Friday postponed the hearing for two weeks, giving the patient more time to prove she is not a danger to herself or others and avoid longer involuntary commitment.

If the patient does not improve, then Friday will have to determine where to continue the treatment. The last remaining state psychiatric hospital, Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa, only accepts about two to three patients from Jefferson County every week. The rest are treated closer to home in beds rented from local psychiatric treatment facilities.

Friday is worried that the funding for those additional beds could be threatened if legislators cut the budget for mental health services.

"I don't know what we'd do without those beds," Friday said.

Those rented psychiatric beds have become part of the system that has sprung up to replace state psychiatric facilities – which have been disappearing faster in Alabama than almost anywhere else in the country. Since 2012, the state has closed three

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psychiatric hospitals – Greil in Montgomery, Searcy in Mobile and North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur. The number of state-owned psychiatric beds decreased from 740 to 268.

The last psychiatric hospital outside of Tuscaloosa, North Alabama Regional Hospital, closed in June.

The state operates just three remaining facilities: Bryce Hospital, Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center and Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility – which serves the criminally mentally ill.

Communities have adapted differently to the changes. In Birmingham, the mental health authority rents beds from Hill Crest and other psychiatric facilities. Friday said the county can only send two to four patients to Bryce in any given week.

In Mobile, East Pointe Hospital, operated by AltaPointe, handles many of the patients who would previously have been sent to Searcy Hospital.

In northern Alabama, the mental health authority replaced the hospital with four 16-bed crisis stabilization units, which are designed to serve the majority of mental health patients who can be treated and released within 90 days.

The law allows for up to five months of involuntary commitment, and issues remain for the most complex patients, who may need months of treatment before they can be safely released into the community. Those patients may need treatment at Bryce instead of a crisis stabilization unit designed for shorter stays.

"There are some people who need long-term hospitalization to resolve their symptoms," said Dr. Richard Craig, executive director of Jefferson-Blount-St. Clair Mental Health Authority, which serves the area around Birmingham. "People with more severe illnesses are waiting longer."

The process of closing state hospitals began as many as 30 years ago, but then accelerated in 2008, when the state cut funding for mental health by more than \$30 million. Since then, the Department of Mental Health has received level funding, which does not account for inflation in medical costs.

Jim Dill, president of the Alabama Council of Community Mental Health Boards, said the state has saved a lot of money by closing the hospitals. Many mental health advocates want to see more of those savings put back into community based services, which could then be expanded to serve more people. Dill said the state never invested enough money in mental health to serve all the people who need it.

"The amount of money that has been shifted from the state to the communities has been adequate to serve the people who were being served by state hospitals," Dill said. "There never was enough money in the system to take care of everyone."

Jim Perdue became the commissioner of mental health this summer. His first objective is to protect the department's budget during the next special session. At least one proposed budget could cut mental health services by five percent. With the addition of federal matching funds, the total amount lost could be as high as \$17 million, Perdue said.

"I'm worried about how much funding we're going to have on Oct. 1," Perdue said. "When it comes to mental health, in just this small part of Alabama, we have a duty to do this."

It is unlikely the state could cut funding to the three remaining facilities, Perdue said. That means any cuts would affect community-based services. That is exactly what worried Friday, who was concerned about beds for Jefferson County.

If the department cut outpatient services, that could affect as many as 3,000 people in Alabama, Perdue said. Ending services to patients receiving outpatient treatment could cause some of them to become sicker, Perdue said.



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"If just 10 percent of them had to be committed, that would be 300 people," he said. "That's already more beds than we have in Bryce Hospital."

Dr. Craig said additional cuts could threaten public safety. Earlier this year, a police officer shot a man in Lawrence County just days after he was turned away from a mental health facility, according to his family.

Events like that one, and the recent shooting in a Lafayette, La. movie theater committed by a mentally ill Alabama man, raise awareness of the need for mental health funding, Perdue said.

The difference between a schizophrenic patient who ends up in Taylor Hardin after committing a violent crime, and one who lives successfully in the community, may depend on mental health funding, Perdue said.

"How much money would it take to continue level services?" Perdue asked. "It would only take about two or three percent. That means you're happy staying the way you are, and I'm not. I want to continue to be more progressive. It would take probably a twenty percent increase, but we don't even want to go there right now. What we're trying to get through is at least level funding, maybe funding to continue level services. But the biggest thing is, tell me something."



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- Twocam**2 hours ago

This is a clear case of people who should be the inmates running the asylum.

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- scratch**10 hours ago

Wasn't it Bob Riley who closed most of the psych hospitals and facilities in Alabama?

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- Roar**18 hours ago

You need to be adding more to mental health not taking away from it... Just crazy.....

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George Jetson 19 hours ago

What's going to happen to the left in Alabama when Trump wins? Will they be committed or turned out into the street?

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 **wales1** 17 hours ago

@George Jetson I'm more worried about right wing nut jobs like Roof murdering and such if things don't go the way they like it..

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 **George Jetson** 15 hours ago

@wales1 You're a sicko.

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 **spud** 14 hours ago

@wales1 @George Jetson I'm with you.

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 **spud** 14 hours ago

@George Jetson what's going to happen when trump mouths off to Putin and gets,a hydrogen missile up his shorts?

Flag Share Like Reply

 **spud** 14 hours ago

@George Jetson from your photo you look like an escapee from some horrid tragedy.

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Serge Storms 20 hours ago

Don't worry, it will stop shrinking when it gets to zero.

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Tillyg417 21 hours ago

A few years ago, I went to a community meeting somewhere, maybe in Huntsville, and I heard a woman named Amy Hinton give a presentation about mental health in Alabama. She is some kind of researcher, I think. if you care about this and ever get a chance to hear this lady talk about mental health, please go listen to her. She talked about how it's funded and the number of people on wait lists for mental health treatment here. I was totally shocked and sad.

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CaresaboutTCS 21 hours ago

The attitude by state officials and the administrators of the mental health facilities is that they will put you on 30 days of medication, pronounce you "cured", and turn you loose. Guess what happens after that? Well, they don't know or care because it is not their problem anymore.

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Alternative 22 hours ago

Please tell your elected officials that mental health resources (while no system is error-free) are important and budget cuts are not the answer by writing, emailing, or calling. Thank you.

Flag Share 5 🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌 Like Reply

 **Harry Hood** 22 hours ago

@Alternative many of the elected officials in AlaBackwards need some mental health treatment.

Flag Share 1 🍌 Like Reply

 **Tillyg417** 20 hours ago

There is a state senator in Virginia whose teenage son went to the hospital for hallucinations and was sent home to wait for an available psych bed. Later that night, the boy stabbed his father in the neck and chest and committed suicide in front of his dad.

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spud 22 hours ago

Funny when I ask you characters if you know conditions in the mental health system personally you all hide. I suspect many of you know them all too well as consumers.

Flag Share

2 👤 Like Reply

spud

23 hours ago

Yep chief and every day these same politicians tell the world what good christians they are. Jesus would run them out of town.

Flag Share

2 👤 Like Reply

Chief Michael Anderson

23 hours ago

Let's see now. Our politicians don't care for the mentally ill even though statistically they or their family members or probably both have a mental illness. They want the Feds to come in and take over our prison system as they've threatened to cut that. It'll cost us just the same or more but it won't cost them any votes. They're forcing counties to pay more for law enforcement by cutting the Trooper budget. Etowah County and probably others have already made preparations to do so through the sheriff's department. They really don't want health care. They don't want to expand Medicaid even though it won't cost the state. They've threatened to cut what we have. Hospitals are screaming for an expansion. Hospitals have to increase their rates to pay their bills. These increased rates mean your insurance premiums will go up. People who can just barely pay their insurance premiums will be forced to join the ranks of the uninsured and the circle starts all over with a larger number of uninsured. I could go on but won't.

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Blackfoot Cat

23 hours ago

@Chief Michael Anderson The homeless and the mentally ill don't vote, ;therefore politicians don't care what happens to them.

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showa22

20 hours ago

@Blackfoot Cat @Chief Michael Anderson Clearly, the mentally ill DO vote. That's how Roy Moore got elected!

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2015playoffs

23 hours ago

Some worried that Alabama's shrinking mental health could shrink more

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aka Trump rally

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Alternative

23 hours ago

Budget cuts for community mental health care, treatment, and services throughout the state are not the answer. .Budget cuts for community mental health resources will create a bigger problem, not a solution.

Without healthy minds we cannot have a healthy community. Why do people think people are either on meds or terminated from employment (its because there is a need or people do not understand mental health care.

Try letting crime escalate and sharing it is now a city or county issue to deal with through their local law enforcement agency budgets. It does not work.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 1 in 4 adults experience mental illness in any given year. It is likely that you know someone who has struggled with mental health issues —perhaps a friend, co-worker, or family member—or that you have experienced mental health issues yourself.

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1 👤 Like Reply

57939names

23 hours ago

I am on the streets in all areas of the city and it is blatantly obvious that many mentally ill are on the streets moving about like a rudderless ship. There is definitely a need for better care of these individuals.

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4 👤 Like Reply



spud

23 hours ago

@57939names would you consider yourself one of these individuals? Have you ever experienced the ,help, given in these places. Thank God He led me out of alabama

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1 👤 Like Reply

spud

1 day ago

I spent a year and a half in Bryce in the 80s. Staff beat the devil out of me and broke me up. I told everyone including this paper nami the department of mental health senator Shelby office

uab and everyone else i could find. No one cared. Many were treated much worse than I.
Thank God I'm gone.

Craig b Griffin

Tucson

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Last Rebel
@spud

1 day ago

Sorry to hear that. Are you doing better in general? Have issues under control?

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1 Like Reply



spud

23 hours ago

@Last Rebel @spud yes much better thank you. Improvements were immediate upon my departure from Alabama. Most places treat you better.

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1 Like Reply



spud

23 hours ago

@Last Rebel @spud are your issues whatever they may be under control Johnny reb?

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1 Like Reply



Last Rebel

18 hours ago

@spud @Last Rebel

No I don't think I have fully addressed mine. I practice denial. Sorry if I offended.

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spud

18 hours ago

@Last Rebel @spud the offense came mostly from the continued abuse. As for contacting the governor you can do that. I'm far from Alabama and bloody well glad i am. God led me from there. I don't intend to ever quit reminding people of just how bad it was for me. Much worse for others.

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Tillyg417

20 hours ago

I'm so very sorry that happened to you. You should contact Bentley's new mental health commissioner and tell him your experience. He needs to know about that. He was a Probate Judge before this, so he probably has no idea about conditions inside Bryce.

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spud

18 hours ago

@Tillyg417 sorry but I did contact several of his predecessors. They couldn't care less. I'm gone from that cursed place and will never return to live.

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Fight oppression

1 day ago

Amy, you might be too young to remember but if you do some background on this you'll find that Reagan gutted the mental health care system and some 1.3 million Americans ended up on the streets.

His response a few years later? The homeless want to be homeless.

Our representatives should be pushed and pushed hard to refund the system.

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George Jetson

23 hours ago

@Fight oppression Link?

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Like Reply



PitchFork

21 hours ago

Google?

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Yukon Do It

1 day ago

Seems this is a step in the wrong direction. Our mentally unstable citizens need MORE help and attention, not less.

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4 Like Reply



spud

1 day ago

@Yukon Do It they don't need to return to state funded beatings like in Bryce.

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George Jetson

23 hours ago

@spud You ever been to Bryce?

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spud

23 hours ago

@George Jetson @spud yeah a year and a half. Staff beat the bell out of me. Treated others much worse. Told everyone. No one cared.

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spud

23 hours ago

@George Jetson @spud how about you George? You been there or places like it.? If you been you know.

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spud

21 hours ago

@George Jetson why did you hide when I answered your question? Not the answer you expected? Truth is like that. It's no respecter of persons.

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