

# Madison County takes aggressive steps to face Alabama's mental health crisis



Madison County Jail. (Paul Gattis/pgattis@al.com)



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**Editor's note: This is the latest in an ongoing [AL.com](#) investigation into the mental health crisis in Alabama.**

They say you have to know someone in this world. After all, they say, that's how things get done.

David Jernigan and Bob Harrison know people. And come October, the intersection of the mentally ill and law enforcement will perhaps never have received so much attention in Huntsville.

For Jernigan, chief deputy of the Madison County sheriff's department, the intersection occurred when he attended a community stakeholders meeting earlier this summer about the mental health issues facing society today. He just happened to be sitting

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next to Brian Davis, the CEO of Wellstone Behavioral Health in Huntsville.

The topic of Mental Health First Aid came up and Jernigan was intrigued. It's a training course designed to help people experiencing a mental health crisis.

"I leaned over and said, 'Do you have this?'" Jernigan said. "He said, 'Oh, yeah.' And we exchanged business cards."

In October, the 114 deputies in the Madison County sheriff's department will attend eight hours of training by Wellstone on Mental Health First Aid.

For Harrison, a Madison County commissioner, the moment occurred through his work on the National Association of Counties Justice and Public Safety steering committee. He got to know Leon Evans, president and CEO of the Center for Health Care Services in San Antonio.

Harrison described Evans as a "worldwide acclaimed guru" on mental health, and a 2014 National Public Radio report said representatives from all 50 states have contacted Evans to learn more about his program.

In October, Evans will be visiting Huntsville to take part in a community stakeholders' meeting to study how best to improve the care of the mentally ill in Madison County.

"I think this is a creative way to try to, what I call, taking people off the liability of society's balance sheet and putting them on the asset side," Harrison said.

In a months-long investigation, AL.com obtained responses from 40 of 67 sheriff departments statewide. Of those responding, 70 percent said they were holding someone for mental health treatment and 65 percent said they have had trouble getting help for a mentally ill inmate in the past year.



### Alabama's mental health crisis: 'It falls back on jails'

While there is no smooth path laid out to help those with mental illness who frequently end up in jails because there is nowhere else to put them, change is occurring. A problem has been recognized, a solution is being sought.

Even as the state of Alabama has dramatically slashed the number of beds available at mental health facilities, Gov. Robert Bentley cited mental health as a potential beneficiary as he pushed for a statewide lottery.

"If someone has a game plan, an action plan that they can use, then someone might not be so afraid to approach someone who is acting a little different and offer help and try to get them into treatment quicker than they might normally," said Rita Limbaugh, who will be leading the Wellstone training of the Madison County deputies.

"Those people would not end up on the streets, under our bridges, in jail."

These initiatives – as well as those in Lauderdale County – have not been cost-prohibitive. That perhaps is another step as the state languishes amid such financial woes. So much so, that a governor, who once criticized the concept of a lottery as a funding mechanism, is now seeking a lottery as a funding mechanism.

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Two deputies in Lauderdale County are getting a total of more than 800 hours of training cost-free from Riverbend Center for Mental Health. The only cost for the eight hours of training for the Madison County deputies is a \$20 book and those funds are coming out of the sheriff department's pistol permit proceeds.

No taxpayer money is being used, Jernigan said.

And the \$7000 to \$8,000 Harrison is spending for the October meeting is from his commission discretionary budget – a fund all Madison County commissioners have to spend as they see fit.

The potential savings, though, could be enormous, Harrison said. He said about 250 of 900 inmates in the Madison County Jail have mental health issues. If the county adopts a program like Evans runs in Texas, maybe half of those 250 could be removed from the jail.

With the cost of \$53 per day per inmate, the savings for the jail could climb into the millions within a year, he said.

Ultimately, much of those savings may be re-directed for the cost of relocating the mentally ill from the jail. But Harrison said it would get them to a place more conducive to achieving better health.

"We're hopefully going to be able to get the kind of insight that I'm relatively assured, based on the statistics I have, that it will be a worthwhile initiative," Harrison said of Evans' visit.

The enthusiasm Harrison has for the October meeting is mirrored by Jernigan's outlook for the training his deputies will get that same month.

Jernigan said academy training on how to deal with people displaying signs of mental illness is "minimal" for law enforcement. And deputies already receive training on basic first aid. So why not adapt a first aid program for mental illness, too?

"We could keep Wellstone very engaged because I want this to be contagious," Jernigan said. "I've already had Madison police department reached out to me. I know Athens PD is interested. I want to do our detention officers. I can see Huntsville police coming on. I want to be an innovator and a leader in things like this."

Both Jernigan and Wellstone's Limbaugh described the eight-hour training for deputies as "a start."

According to the Mental Health First Aid syllabus that will guide the training for the deputies, the objective states: "The evidence behind Mental Health First Aid demonstrates that it makes people feel more comfortable managing a crisis situation and builds mental health literacy – helping the public identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illness."

The syllabus points out that those with mental illness and substance abuse disorders "interact more often with the criminal justice system than the general population. Thus, the better prepared officers and staff are to respond effectively and appropriately, the more likely the interaction will be a positive one."

Jernigan said he will attend the training sessions as a signal to deputies that the program is a top priority for himself and Sheriff Blake Dorning.

"The program has so much information," she said. "It gives you a five-step action plan. When the time allows within that eight hours, we practice doing scenarios or a potential thing that could happen. How would you use your action plan for that?"

And as law enforcement has sought to be more effective on a variety of points, mental health has not been one of them, Jernigan said. This program, he said, is "a start" to change that.

"This is one spoke in the wheel on some things on police reform but it's one we're not doing," Jernigan said. "We're doing a lot of stuff – we have body cameras, we have less-than-lethal (weapons, such as Tasers), we have internal affairs, we have procedural justice.

"We have a lot of things that help us as an organization. My background in the FBI was training so I want to be able to bring things to the guys on the front line."



## In Alabama, mental illness is often a factor in police shootings

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