

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



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

The sheriff described him as a 23-year-old man with the mind of a 6-year-old. Wherever he was, he ran away.

Finally, after desperate calls from his family, deputies located him hiding in the woods in northwest Alabama.

"We spent a lot of man hours looking for him," said the sheriff, Rick Singleton of Lauderdale County.

Eventually, the 23-year-old-man with the mind of a 6-year-old assaulted his mother. Deputies responded, arrested him and took him to the Lauderdale County Detention Center with the intention of getting him treatment at Riverbend Center for Mental Health in Florence.

What happened next is a snapshot of Alabama's mental health crisis.

"He needed help and they knew he needed help but there was nowhere to put him," Singleton said. "It was either stay at home and keep running off and getting hurt or killed or hold him down here with the hopes of getting a bed."

The "hold him" phrase underestimated the problem, said Jason Butler, director of the Lauderdale jail. Because of a lack of facilities, because of doubling as a jail and a holding area for those in mental crisis, there was nowhere to place the 23-year-old-man with the mind of a 6-year-old.

The man eventually settled in what Butler called a multi-holding room – a place at the jail originally designed to briefly hold inmates awaiting transfer to court or prison.

"I think when we locked him up," the sheriff said, "they said he was like No. 1,800 on the list and we were able to get him bumped up to where he was No. 1 on the list and it took us six to eight weeks after that to get him in a bed. It all falls back on the jails."

It all falls back on the jails.

"Our jails have become our mental health treatment facilities," Singleton said. "And there's no treatment about it. It's become our holding facility for mentally ill."

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## Three plans to help

It's 2016 and engineers are building a rocket to go to Mars. Virtually every pants pocket in America carries a hand-held computer that doubles as a phone.

How best to care for the mentally ill, though, remains a mystery.

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.

To underscore that point, consider three initiatives underway in north Alabama. Three initiatives – all dramatically different, all seeking the path to provide the help mentally ill people need and no consensus to guide them:

- Two Lauderdale County deputies are undergoing more than 400 hours of training each to become mental health officers.
- All 114 deputies in the Madison County sheriff's department will receive eight hours of training in a program known as Mental Health First Aid.
- A Madison County Commissioner is spending more than \$8,000 to kick start a program he hopes will be a blueprint for others around the state, including bringing a renowned mental health expert to Huntsville.



### Madison County takes steps to face mental health crisis

"It just seems like the mental health issue is not getting any better," said David Jernigan, chief deputy at the Madison County sheriff's department. "There are a lot of people who need help. We're the ones who are going to be there."

Indeed, mental health and law enforcement has become a common thread. And now there are three efforts to improve upon that union of last resort.

In Lauderdale County, it began almost 20 years ago. Singleton, now the sheriff, was the Florence police chief.

There was a standoff back in the late 90s – the exact date escaped the sheriff's memory – where a man had taken his mother hostage at gunpoint. Police responded, SWAT was activated and flashing blue lights were everywhere.



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

Early in the standoff, police learned that the suspect had a history of mental problems and, in fact, had been in counseling at Riverbend Center for Mental Health in Florence. Perfect, Singleton thought. Get the counselor out to the scene to help talk the patient out of the crisis.

Only it wasn't so perfect. At that time, the counselor was not permitted to be at the scene because of liability issues.

Singleton blew his stack, sounding off in talking with reporters about how the obvious solution couldn't be used.

"Out of my frustration, I made some comments to the media that got their attention so we had a meeting of the minds after that incident," Singleton said.

### **Police-based mental health officers**

The result was a plan put in place to train a mental health officer in Florence. Eventually, that mental health officer became four members of the Florence police force. Later, Florence police contracted with the sheriff's department to make those mental health officers available for calls beyond the Florence city limits.

They worked a week at a time, on call 24/7 – a big step forward in the effort to help those with mental illness.

In February, about a year after Singleton took office after being elected sheriff, his office received involuntary commitment papers to serve to Timothy Vincent Murphy. Deputies also received information that Murphy had access to guns at his residence.

Instead of the normal team of two deputies to serve the papers on Murphy and take him into custody, Singleton assigned four. When deputies entered Murphy's home, he fired a gun. Deputies fired back.

Both Murphy and a deputy, Randall McCrary, were injured in the shootout, though neither seriously. McCrary has returned to duty and Murphy has been indicted for attempted murder.

The incident led Singleton to form a task force to address the issue of how best for law enforcement to deal with mentally ill people. The immediate result is that Singleton sought, and identified, two deputies eager to begin training to become mental health officers themselves.

They are undergoing more than 400 hours each of training from experts at Riverbend – at no cost to the sheriff's department, Singleton said -- and will eventually join the rotation with the four mental health officers in the Florence police department.

Deputies are also undergoing additional training for mental health as well as detention officers at the jail.

"It's a two-sided issue because we have the community but we also have the jail," said Singleton, whose office operates the detention center. "That's not something Florence (police) supposedly has to deal with but they do. When (the jail has) an issue, they call the community mental health officer.

"That's another reason we needed to do our part. And (mental health) is becoming more and more of an issue."

In the director's small office off the lobby of the Lauderdale jail, nothing fazes Butler after 16 years on the job.

"You see everything," he said. "You're not shocked by anything. We see it and are used to it on a daily basis."

### **'He fought me to get back to his cell'**

After 16 years, Butler has a story or two.

"We had a gentleman who had mental illness," Butler said, "who was being taken somewhere (for treatment) and when I went to get him out of his cell to be released, he was going out the door, he didn't want to leave. He fought me to get back to his cell.

"He was still fighting us when the deputy drove up to transport him. We had to shackle him fully to get him out of jail. And he was released. He was going somewhere where they would treat him better than we could. We had to fight him. He didn't want to leave."

And make no mistake, the Lauderdale jail is not a pleasant place. A cinder block building with two long halls, inmates are housed in a succession of rooms behind those heavy steel doors and shatterproof plexiglass.

On a warm, overcast summer day earlier this month, the temperatures were stifling in the jail corridors and inmates appeared to be serving their time wearing a minimal amount of clothing.

"Jail is not where these people need to be," Singleton said of the mentally ill. "But it's the only available remedy a lot of times."

Butler said he estimated perhaps as many as 80 percent of the inmates have some type of mental illness, which averages about 200 inmates daily. That perhaps seems out of step with other area jails – Singleton said in Morgan County, Sheriff Ana Franklin estimated about 40 percent of the inmates had mental issues and in Madison County, Jernigan put it at about 25 percent "that we know about."

Either way, it's a burden that jailers must carry. Another benefit of the task force Singleton formed was that training served not only deputies but also jail staff.

"We did a simulation of what it's like to hear voices, like some mentally ill people have," Butler said. "We had to put on headphones and we had voices in and out and different kinds of voices."

One earpiece might sound one way while the other might sound another way.

"One meek, one rude," he said. "You had to function. You had to put a puzzle together or solve questions or you had to go through a routine. Just all sorts of things while you're listening to this."

"This one may be telling you you're worthless, this one may be making laughing noises or animal sounds. Or one may be telling you you're great, you're stupendous and this one is over here crying."

Said his assistant at the jail, Vicky White, "It's hard to concentrate on what you're supposed to be doing."



### **As psychiatric hospitals close, one jail expands to house mentally ill**

The benefit, Butler said, is that in some small way, it gave jail officers "understanding" of what some of the inmates live with.

"What I really want to see is all of our officers have a working knowledge of the issue so they are better prepared to deal with it when they encounter it in the field," Singleton said. "That's for their safety as well as the safety of our citizens. That's an ongoing process, a never-ending process. If you went through it five years ago, that's great. But you have to have a refresher from time to time."

Because history has shown there will always be another case, another man who is 23-years-old with the mind of a 6-year-old.

In that city holding cell, he slept on the floor on a "boat" – essentially a six-foot long piece of plastic with a mattress – for almost four months because there was nowhere to safely put him with a bed.

"He didn't need to be in jail," the sheriff said. "He spent nearly four months in a makeshift cell until we could get him into a facility."

"We all are after the same thing. We want to have the people with mental health issues get the treatment they need and not punish them for having a mental illness. At the end of the day, that's what we're hoping to achieve."