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New Calhoun County mental health facility opening in March

by [Patrick McCreless](#)

pmccreless@annistonstar.com

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A planned 16-bed mental health facility will open in March in Alexandria as scheduled, officials said this week, providing needed care to residents closer to their families.

The Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health Board, based in Anniston, expects to open the 7,810 square-foot facility in Alexandria on U.S. 431 by March 18. Approved in September with a March completion date, the designated mental health facility will provide long-term care for court-committed, non-criminal patients.

The facility is part of a state plan to close or downsize Alabama's large mental hospitals and open smaller, community-based centers, which some mental health experts say are more cost effective and provide better care.

Mickey Turner, executive director of the Mental Health Board, said staff are set to start moving into the facility in the first week of March. The board will hire about 25 employees for the facility, from nurses to therapists and counselors. A physician will also be on call to make rounds at the facility as needed, Turner said.

The facility will treat patients exhibiting symptoms such as depression, suicidal tendencies or erratic behavior.

"Everything is going great," Turner said of the facility's construction. "We're excited about getting it open and starting to take patients."

The facility will start accepting patients by mid-March, Turner said.

Turner said the benefit of the facility will be that local patients will not need to travel far for treatment.

"Clients will be able to remain in the area, which will make it easier on the families since they won't have to travel farther," Turner said. "And it will be cheaper on the state to treat them locally."

The Alabama Department of Mental Health received an extra \$13.5 million for the 2014 fiscal year from the state Legislature to pay for several facilities like the one in Alexandria. The facilities are necessary in part because the state closed Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon and Greil Montgomery Psychiatric Hospital in late 2012 due to budget deficits. Also, services are being scaled back at Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa and North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur.

Lt. Jon Garlick, mental health officer for the Calhoun County Sheriff's Office, said

having a local mental health care facility will benefit area patients.

"Family support for people with mental illness is vital," Garlick said.

Calhoun County Probate Judge Alice Martin, who gives orders to commit patients to mental health facilities after a petition is filed, agreed with Garlick about the new facility.

"I think what it will mean for the community is we'll have a tremendous resource for those who suffer from mental illness," Martin said. "When you have family support, it's more beneficial than having a patient in a county that's several hours away ... many times treatment includes counseling and that involves family counseling."

Garlick added that the new facility will help area patients get treated more quickly. Garlick said he often has to send mental health patients in need of immediate observation to Regional Medical Center in Anniston due to bed shortages at state hospitals. If RMC has no beds available, patients are sent to the Calhoun County Jail on a misdemeanor charge until a bed at a state hospital opens up, he said.

"With this facility, that will happen less often," Garlick said.

Staff writer Patrick McCreless: 256-235-3561. On Twitter [@PMcCreless_Star](https://twitter.com/PMcCreless_Star).

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