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## New mental health facility to accept patients in April; officials say local care will benefit patients, families

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Robin Jackson studied a patient's profile in her office at the recently opened mental health facility in Alexandria Wednesday. Jackson became a therapist to help better the lives of and advocate for residents in crisis.

She expects the new facility will be one of the best ways yet to help her achieve that goal.

"I'm so excited about the possibility of helping ... having people in the community here and having their family able to engage," Jackson said. "You have to have family support to help keep them stable."

The Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health Board expects to admit patients to its new 16-bed, crisis residential program facility for the first time April 21. Opened March 25 on U.S. 431 in Alexandria, the facility will provide more efficient and better care for court-committed, non-criminal patients by keeping them close to home and their families, officials say.

The facility is part of a state plan to close or downsize Alabama's large mental hospitals due in part to state budget cuts and open smaller, community-based centers to lower costs and provide more efficient care. 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.

Mickey Turner, executive director of the Mental Health Board, said the Alexandria facility is the first of its type in the county, providing long-term care for court-committed patients or residents experiencing crisis, such as depression or suicidal tendencies. Previously, such local patients were sent to North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur.

"The benefit is individuals will be treated locally," Turner said. "It will be easier for families to have access and it will be less expensive to treat them here than at a state hospital."

Several of the facility's 22 employees were on site Wednesday morning receiving crisis prevention training. The facility has a variety of caregivers, from nurses to therapists and counselors.

"Clients with mental health issues, it can be harder to de-escalate them when they get angry," said Deborah Bryant, who conducted the training class. "We train staff to calm

them and to teach clients new skills at handling their anger."

The one-story facility looks much like a modern physician's clinic, complete with a check-in station with flat-screen computers. Individual, dorm-like rooms are on both ends of the building, centered around a common room for eating and recreational activities.

"Families can come and visit up here," facility supervisor Angie Nabors said while standing in front of large blue plastic chairs in the common room.

Nabors said patients will stay between two and three months on average and spend their mornings making their beds and eating breakfast, followed by therapy sessions in which they'll learn about their medication as well as life-coping skills. In the afternoons, patients will have family visitation and recreation time.

"And we'll have a psychiatrist who will make rounds every day," Nabors said.

Susie Heard, counselor at the facility, said she has worked for the mental health board for 27 years and expects the new center to be of great benefit to the community.

"Our community needs this since funding cuts at the hospitals," Heard said. "And people will know they're coming somewhere where family is close by."

Lt. Jon Garlick, mental health officer for the Calhoun County Sheriff's Office, said he recently visited the facility and was impressed with what he saw.

"Everyone has taken great pains to make sure everything is safe and up to modern standards," Garlick said. "It's going to provide critical care treatment and the ability to get local people treated locally, which will give the opportunity to better provide services."

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