

Local board hopes agreement will aid mental health access

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People in need of mental health treatment may soon get that help faster, after local officials worked out a compromise.

The problem: A dwindling number of beds for such patients and complicated health care needs that often require multiple agencies to provide.

On Tuesday, the Calhoun County Mental Health Advisory Board agreed that mental health officer Jon Garlick of the Sheriff's Office will work with Highland Health Systems to create a procedure to solve the issues. That procedure would be twofold: allow Garlick to order patients be held — even against their will — for up to 72 hours, and clear patients for treatment on site.

“There aren't enough beds, and what beds I do have I can't use,” Garlick said.

Calhoun County residents are being turned away from treatment due to other physical health issues that Highland Health, the designated mental health treatment facility, is unable to provide care for.

“I know of three people they've turned away since October,” he said Friday. “There could be more that didn't even make it to the court order part of the process. If something doesn't change, someone could die.”

Under policy changes enacted in July, patients must be examined and deemed physically stable, known as medically clear, before treatment can be administered for mental health issues. The policy slows down the process for those in a crisis by adding a time-consuming step, Garlick said.

Adding to the issue, Highland Health Systems, formerly Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health, stopped taking hold orders for patients in crisis in October, Garlick said. This further cut down on the number of available beds in the area, he said.

“With a hold order, I am supposed to be able to pick up a patient experiencing a crisis and take them to the crisis center in Alexandria for 72 hours,” Garlick said. “I have one business day to seek a petition with the probate court for an evaluation.”



Mental Health Advisory Board

The Calhoun County Mental Health Advisory Board, consisting of Sheriff Larry Amerson, Mickey Turner, Judge Laura Phillips, Sam Almaroad, and Judge Alice Martin, met to discuss improvements to the mental health system on Tuesday, Dec. 1, 2015.

Now, Garlick cannot do anything without a court order first, but that could soon change.

Medical clearance

The need for compromise arose, Garlick said, after he became frustrated that an Anniston woman was continually turned away from Highland Health because of her high blood pressure.

“They wouldn’t medically clear her,” he said. “In this case, her condition is a result of her mental illness. She isn’t taking her blood pressure medicine because she is mentally ill.”

When asked about the medical clearance policy, Highland Health Executive Director Mickey Turner said patients can be turned away for a number of reasons.

“There is not one specific physical problem that keeps someone from being medically cleared,” he said. “If a person has high blood pressure and is at stroke level then that is an issue that we cannot treat, but if it’s mildly high then that’s not an issue.”

Turner declined to speak on the specific case of the woman Garlick mentioned, saying he was unaware of her situation.

Theresa Nguyen, director of policy and programming with Mental Health America, a nonprofit advocacy center in Virginia, said Tuesday that there are no set guidelines to adhere to when medically clearing someone.

“It is up to the discretion of the designated mental health facility,” she said by phone. “Now, should someone be turned away for high blood pressure? I’m not so sure they should be.”

Bed shortage

Since 2012, Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon, Greil Montgomery Psychiatric Hospital and North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur closed, leaving the Alabama Department of Mental Health with smaller, local designated mental health facilities such as the one in Alexandria.

Nguyen said Alabama ranked 46th among the states in access to care in list produced by MHA.

“Part of the issue are the number of beds,” she said. “State psychiatric beds have declined, but they were intended for long-term care. The majority of people don’t need long-term care but rather care they can turn to at any time within their community.”

However, Nguyen said, without an investment at the legislative level, the localized care Alabama needs won’t happen.

“Alabama’s legislators need to invest and provide local care now or invest later when they’ll have to pay more because those individuals who need help are in the hospital or jail.”

After Regional Medical Center declined to take mental health patients, Garlick turned to the designated mental health facility for Etowah County, Gadsden Regional.

“I appreciate Gadsden and their willingness to help, but I shouldn’t have to seek help from outside of the

county,” he said. “We need at least 50 beds here in the county.”

According to the Treatment Advocacy Center, a community with 100,000 people should have about 50 beds. In 2014, Alabama was estimated to be home for about 4.8 million people, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

“Statewide we should have about 2,400 beds,” Garlick said. “Right now, we have about 500.”

The issue is at the state level, according to Garlick.

“The Department of Mental Health won’t acknowledge that we have a bed shortage, because what they are seeing at their level is that people are getting committed, getting treated, and they are getting released,” he said.

While it is true people are being released in a timely manner, Garlick said, the return rate is high. With fewer beds, patients are released before they are ready and return in six months, he said.

“We are not providing the standard of care.”

Beverly Bell-Shambley, associate commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health, returned a message on behalf of James Purdue, the commissioner.

“He is aware of the current situation in Calhoun County and he is planning a meeting with those that are stakeholders in the area,” Bell-Shambley said last week.

She did not specify which situation the commissioner plans to speak to officials about.

The solution

The county advisory board, made up of Turner, Sheriff Larry Amerson, Probate Judge Alice Martin, Family Judge Laura Phillips, and Calhoun County resident Sam Almaroad, convened for a two-and-a-half hour executive session prior to a meeting Tuesday where the compromise was worked out.

With fewer resources and fewer beds, something needed to be done, Amerson said.

“This board was created to help people,” he said after the meeting. “We are going to have to do some legal research because we don’t really know what the law actually requires a designated mental health facility to do. This is like trying to fix a flat tire with a lot of holes.”

Garlick was forced to seek beds outside of the county because of the changes, he said, but soon he will be able to use the crisis center again.

“What I got out of that meeting was that Highland Health will start taking hold orders again during normal business hours and after hours,” he said after the meeting.

However, Garlick does not have the green light on hold orders yet, Turner said at the meeting.

“We need to get this procedure to medically clear people in place first,” Turner said.

Garlick said he is confident the procedure could be worked out by the end of the week.

“There is an easy fix,” Garlick said Tuesday. “All Highland has to do is contract with a primary care service to provide care for physical issues. It literally costs them nothing to do that, and RMC is willing and able to step up.”