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## Our View: Leaders take steps for mental healthcare

5 hrs ago



The suicide rate in the United States grew 22 percent between 2005 and 2015, while Cullman County saw those figures double in 2017 to 25 confirmed cases.

Alarm is spreading across the nation, Alabama and the local community over suicide and mental health care in general.

Representatives of various agencies and organizations in Cullman County have been meeting for months to find a way to address mental health issues. Monday, the group came forward with a three-phase plan that has clear initiatives and deserves support.

The first phase is to address the significant rise in the number of people coming to Cullman Regional Emergency Department. The hospital is where emergency mental health cases are directed for

evaluation by qualified professionals. But at that point the patient may be kept there for long periods of time as physicians try to find a bed at a certified institution for treating such cases.

The second phase is to improve funding for crisis services and address statewide barriers to care. Under this effort, creating an effective outpatient program with trained professionals would prevent the patient from ending up back in the emergency department.

Phase three calls for opening a freestanding mental health crisis center in Cullman County to provide triage and crisis treatment for adults and families with mental health or addiction crisis.

Neal Morrison, the local advisory group leader, noted that state and private psychiatric hospital beds have steadily closed while the need for such care as steadily increased. He said there were 88 commitments to psychiatric facilities from Cullman County in 2014, but by 2017 the number tripled to 265. The last few years in the area have also seen high-profile incidents involving mental illness that led to deaths.

With health professionals, law enforcement leaders, judges, educators and juvenile social services representative involved in this local committee, Cullman County is clearly stepping up to solve an issue that has been ignored at the state and federal levels. This committee is a consensus of leaders who are seeing firsthand the impact of spotty funding and services because there is no commitment to funding.

The three phases recommended by the advocacy committee on mental health is sensible and can be done. We encourage the state and local governments and organizations to support this outreach in Cullman County.

Mental health issues cover many areas that are certainly not all related to drug use or violence. Professionals in health, law enforcement, the courts and social services have been warning of this crisis for years. Cullman County has a reputation for solving problems and helping people. This plan is a tremendous step in the right direction to serve the local community.

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