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Mental health care facilities

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CULLMAN — The need for new facilities for patients committed for psychiatric treatment is urgent across Alabama. Mental Healthcare of Cullman is about to bring some relief in that area with a 16-bed facility.

Chris Van Dyke, executive director of Mental Healthcare of Cullman, said the roughly \$1.5 million project has been awarded a \$700,000 state grant to help with the cost. An actual final figure for construction will be determined after bids are let. The facility will be one of four new ones for north-central Alabama.

Cullman County's new facility will be a secure locked group home for patients that have been court-ordered to receive psychiatric treatment. Many mental health advocates believe patients receive more effective treatment and care in smaller, less isolating facilities.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health is moving away from large mental health hospitals to smaller group homes. Officials believe the new approach will be more cost effective and provide patients with more freedom during treatment.

Since the 1990s, Alabama has closed 10 other mental health treatment centers. Last year, with deep budget cuts afoot, the Department of Mental Health closed Searcy Hospital Mount Vernon and Greil Montgomery Psychiatric Hospital.

The community-based approach to mental health treatment is providing more avenues for funding and perhaps a better approach for the patients.

The state, as well as the nation, has witnessed a decline in mental health care at a time when it should be on the rise.

Mental health treatment has come a long way in recent years, but the lack of facilities has caused a hardship for those who needed extended treatment as well as families looking for options to help loved ones.

Establishing a 16-bed facility in Cullman County will serve the local and surrounding communities well. Moving away from the large facilities of the past to a more personal setting like the one planned locally is a welcome approach to mental health care in the area.