

The Daily Home

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TOP STORY

Wide range of experts agree: More funding needed for mental health services in Alabama



Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

A wide range of experts gathered Thursday at The Daily Home for a closed forum on mental health issues.

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TALLADEGA -- The Daily Home assembled a group of experts from several public offices Thursday night for a wide-ranging discussion of issues relating back to mental health and related services for those who need them.

In attendance at the closed forum were Talladega County District Attorney Steve Giddens, Sheriff Jimmy Kilgore, Chief Deputy Ken Flowers and Jail Administrator Ron Smith; Tess Daniel of the Talladega County Probate Office; Talladega police Chief Jason Busby; and Clinical Director Cyrilla Beveridge and Crisis Team Leader Doris Holmes of AltaPointe Health Systems, the agency that recently replaced Cheaha Mental Health.

Although each professional brought somewhat different experiences to bear on the conversation, a consensus did emerge that mental health was underfunded in Alabama, and that additional facilities and trained professionals were needed.

Giddens spoke first. As a prosecutor, he explained, it was sometimes necessary for a defendant to be evaluated, first to determine if he is competent to stand trial and, if it is raised by the defense, if there is a severe mental disease or defect that could be used as a defense.

"I'm not throwing off on Taylor-Hardin," Giddens said, referring to the last secure state psychiatric facility. "They have to cover the whole state." Delays there do "slow things down. It's not for a bad reason, but it does slow things down."

Busby said his officers have fairly frequent interactions with mentally ill people, with suicide attempts being the largest category of interaction. City policy requires training every three years and for all new officers in handling situations involving the mentally ill. The Calhoun County Sheriff's Office provides this training.

"The training is very thorough," Busby said, "but there is no such thing as a typical call for us. Everything is fluid. You never know what you're going to get into. If you do this job long enough, nothing is shocking."

The Talladega County Sheriff's Office is responsible for all jail inmates in the county, as well as those being transferred in or out for evaluations. According to Flowers, "When they come into our custody, it can create a multitude of problems. We have to hold them and to protect the community, but we're not really equipped or designed for that."

Still, the situation in Talladega is better than in some other jails in the state. The Talladega Jail does have contracts for medical care, including people who can dispense prescription medications to inmates.

Drug abuse does not help the situation, Smith said.

"Drug use is pretty common in the present day world, and we're not qualified to determine whether or not it's a mental issue or a drug issue," Smith said. "We know how to control people humanely. What we need are people with therapy skills."

Said Kilgore, "It's not a unique problem. We're all dealing with it, whether it's in law enforcement or public safety, or in state or local government. It comes down to funding, and mental health funding is not what it should be.

"That's not conducive to care ... But that solution is something that none of us in this room have any control over. You need funding at the state level for facilities, so that people have somewhere to go and people trained to help them."

Added Giddens, "But someplace secure at the same time. Right now, Taylor-Hardin is the only secure facility in the state. In the meantime, people sit in jail pending trial or treatment."

In response to a reader question about converting empty buildings to psychiatric care facilities, the consensus around the table was the same: there had to be funding for trained personnel and proper facilities.

While Taylor-Hardin is the only secure facility remaining in Alabama, there are various levels of treatment, according to Holmes.

"For full commitment, you have Taylor-Hardin, Bryce and Mary Harper," she said. "Then you have designated mental health facilities in hospitals like Brookwood and Hillcrest. Those are closer and more accessible ... Then there are residential placements and outpatient placements. We try to get everybody an appropriate level of care."

Giddens said placements for people facing felony charges are far more limited, which is what can create problems.

"It can take weeks or months for them to be seen (at a state facility)," he said. "Ultimately, they get what they need, but it takes too long, and that's because of a shortage of staff and funds."

Beveridge explained that mental illness can cover a wide range of symptoms and diagnoses, from major depression, psychoses such as schizophrenia, personality disorders and substance abuse issues, "which are a whole different category," she said. All of them have a certain stigma attached to them, which can be a problem both with integrating someone back into their community or in dealing with community resistance to new facilities.

"Everyone agrees there is a problem, and that we need more mental health services," she said. "But when we try to followup, the response is always 'not in my neighborhood.'"

Said Holmes, "We have to be as focused on mental health as we are on physical well-being. But people accept physical problems more readily than mental ones. Awareness is needed on that."

Beveridge said AltaPointe is going to be offering evidence-based training in the community, a sort of "mental first aid."

The Talladega County Probate Office, which is involved in the involuntary commitment process, is also called on to determine whether a particular person's issue is substance abuse or another form of mental illness.

"Sometimes it can be a revolving door," Daniel said.

Involuntary commitments are referred to Alta-Pointe for evaluation, and a petition is written up and sent to Probate Judge Billy Atkinson. If it is an emergency petition, the person can be committed for up to seven days. If not, the person is entitled to a hearing, with attorneys for each side, before being committed. It is up to the sheriff to make sure that person attends the hearing, she said.

If the person is committed after the hearing, the same problems crops up again. The person in need of commitment often ends up in jail while waiting on treatment.

"It's not supposed to hold people like that," Daniel said, "but you can't just leave them in the hallway at the courthouse, either."

Said Giddens, "And if they're out with no supervision, that's also a tough spot for the probate office and Alta-Pointe. If you let them out and they kill somebody, who answers for that. If they're out on bond and they hurt someone while waiting for their evaluation, what then. That has happened before. Somewhere in the state, it's probably going on every day."



