

Mental hospitals' closings a success, commissioner says

By Mary Sell Montgomery Bureau | Posted: Saturday, April 26, 2014 9:45 pm

MONTGOMERY — Two years after it was announced that two state mental health hospitals would close — and Decatur's North Alabama Regional Hospital would not — officials say the transition in the southern part of the state to community-based care has gone well.

What that success means for the future of North Alabama Regional remains to be seen.

The 77-patient Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery and 250-patient Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon both closed in late 2012.

There were several reasons behind the downsizing: cost savings for the state; compliance with a federal directive that people with disabilities shouldn't be unnecessarily segregated from their communities; and because moving people to smaller facilities where they get more individualized attention closer to home is the right thing to do, said Jim Reddoch, commissioner of the State Department of Mental Health.

The closures saved the state about \$40 million, much of which was directed toward beefing up the local mental health centers — and the network of facilities and services they coordinate — in the areas affected by the closures.

This year, the state started sending more resources to the mental health centers in north Alabama.

"We are shifting this program of placing committed patients into the community to the northern counties, the Bryce Hospital and the North Alabama Regional areas," Reddoch said last week.

If that is successful, it could mean the need for fewer beds at North Alabama Regional, but Reddoch said it's too early to tell.

"We have not gotten to a point about making a decision about the two remaining hospitals, Bryce and North Alabama," Reddoch said. "What that really means is that we haven't gotten to a point about making a decision about North Alabama, because Bryce will be there."

Saving money

Closing Bryce is unrealistic because the hospital moved into a new \$73 million facility in Tuscaloosa last year. It serves as a "safety net" for the southern part of the state, taking patients whose needs are beyond what can be accommodated in the community-based centers.

North Alabama Regional, which has about 140 employees, costs about \$11 million a year to operate — a little more than \$400 per patient, per day. It serves a 20-county area, including the Tennessee Valley and the Shoals.

Reddoch said the patients could be served for less money in community-based programs. For one thing,

when patients are in state institutions, they're not eligible for federal Medicaid. In community-based programs, they are.

"Any time you see the possibility of saving some money, you need to address it, but I have not given any directive to get ready to close North Alabama Regional," Reddoch said. "At the moment, we are just watching to see the impact of Phase 2 additional funding to these (north Alabama) mental health centers."

Riverbend Center for Mental Health in Florence serves Lauderdale, Colbert and Franklin counties and has received some of that additional funding, Executive Director Bryan Libell said. It has opened two three-bed homes that are staffed 24 hours a day.

A lot of people who are in a state hospital can be served in smaller community settings, if there is staff available to assist them, Libell said.

"It is a more comfortable level of care," he said. "The individual is able to remain in their community and keep family contacts."

Years of downsizing

The downsizing of state mental hospitals began about 40 years ago, Reddoch said. Then, Bryce and Searcy had a combined 8,000 patients.

"There was a time when if you went to Bryce, you were going to be there for the rest of your life because there were no meds, there was no community support at all," Reddoch said. "But now, these greatly expanded and enhanced community programs, along with some really good anti-psychotic medications, mean these folks can function in society really well. They don't need to be in that hospital setting."

Reddoch was appointed to his job in June 2012, just in time to close the two hospitals. He has about 26 years in mental health experience, including as director at Bryce and Taylor Hardin.

When the closures were announced — originally North Alabama Regional was on the list — there was an outcry, including from probate judges around the state who commit patients to their nearest state hospital.

"I was very concerned," said Baldwin County Probate Judge Tim Russell. He went as far as calling Gov. Robert Bentley to share those concerns about what closing Searcy would mean.

"For something that I was very worried about, it has turned out well for us in Baldwin County," Russell said.

Part of the success has been because of the opening of the 18-bed EastPointe Hospital, a private psychiatric hospital in Daphne.

"It has been almost a seamless transition from the old system of committing someone and sending them to the state hospital to committing someone and sending them to the community mental health center in their hometown," Reddoch said.

But he stressed there is no plan or timeline for any changes at North Alabama Regional.

"We are watching an evolving system," Reddoch said.

Mary Sell covers state government for The Decatur Daily. She can be reached at msell@decaturdaily.com. Follow on Twitter @DD_MarySell.