

Evolving mental health care ominous for Decatur hospital

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The Issue

As the state continues to prefer small, community operations in its quest to save money on mental health, the fate of Decatur's North Alabama Regional Hospital looks increasingly grim.

As the state continues to look to balance the budget, it appears increasingly likely that Decatur's North Alabama Regional Hospital for mental health could join two others in Alabama that have been shuttered in the past two years.

If any good is to come of the closings and the reductions in state funding for mental health, it's that they force stakeholders and politicians to look for other ways to take care of those who need help. Hopefully, some of the new ways will coincidentally be better ways.

The state has saved \$40 million in two years since the hospitals, which served more than 320 patients, closed.

Part of the impetus for change was not financial, but a federal directive to not unnecessarily segregate people with disabilities from their communities. State Mental Health Commissioner Jim Reddoch said serving people in smaller facilities where they get more individual attention is the right thing to do.

A new 16-bed facility in Alexandria opened last week, and officials have high expectations for it. The Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health Board believes the facility will provide more efficient and better care for court-committed, non-criminal patients by keeping them close to home and their families.

It will take a lot of 16-bed units to replace the large hospitals, but the Legislature appropriated \$13.5 million last year to build more such facilities in other counties.

If this is the wave of the future, it is bad news for employees of North Alabama Regional.

The state first announced plans to shutter North Alabama Regional in 2012, along with Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon and Greil Memorial in Montgomery. But state Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, and other lawmakers rallied to its rescue.

Orr used political capital and logic to make the case: The hospital was one of few state investments in Morgan County.

Our concern is not that large hospitals stay open, if the possibility exists that smaller ones better serve patients and their families. Our concern is that we commit our best resources, including competent employees, to the 18 to 20 percent of the U.S. population who suffer from a mental, behavioral or emotional disorder in a given year.

That comes to 43.7 million Americans, so chances are you know one. Actually, probably a lot more than one; there's a 1-in-5 chance you are one. Four percent of non-institutionalized adult Americans have suffered a serious mental distress episode within the past 30 days.

So this is not someone else's problem, as we as a society too often view the travails of the less fortunate.

We hope the new plan is a move in the right direction, not just a cheaper solution. And we ask the state to ensure that good employees at North Alabama Regional are given priority opportunities if and when the day that it is closed comes.