

Services dwindling for mental health, substance abuse

By Leah Cayson and Briana Harris Staff Writers | Posted: Sunday, October 11, 2015 12:00 am

Many people suffering from mental health and substance abuse disorders are struggling to find help as local funding for treatment programs dwindles and state funding remains flat.

More community-based treatment programs were supposed to follow the closure of North Alabama Regional Hospital in June, but such local programs lack funding.

“The issue now is to maintain community services,” said Jim Dill, executive director of the Alabama Council of Community Mental Health Boards. “That’s the trouble we are running into now.”

Dill said the state has gone as far as it needs to go in closing hospitals. Three state-operated mental health facilities with about 500 beds remain open. The average cost of a state hospital bed is about \$150,000 a year, Dill said.

If the state provides level funding and local funding is cut, other funding sources are needed to keep the community programs afloat, Dill said.

“We do not have, as a whole, the support in local funding across the state like many states would have,” Dill said. “Mental health centers in many states get a lot more in their local funding than we do here in Alabama, with a few exceptions.”

The problem, said Bryan Libell, chief executive of Riverbend Center for Mental Health in Florence, is not the closure of North Alabama Regional, but the lack of funding for alternative treatment options.

“That was pretty well planned over a year-and-a-half period of time,” Libell said of the closure. “The (Alabama) Department of Mental Health opened several crisis units across the state to accommodate the need.”

Libell said Riverbend’s outpatient services received more than a 15 percent cut from the Department of Mental Health in fiscal 2009 and have not received an increase since.

“The cost of everything keeps going up,” Libell said. “You have to make adjustments somewhere. It has impacted availability of outpatient services.”

The shortage of funding from the Department of Mental Health also has limited north Alabama treatment options for those struggling with substance abuse.

Quest Recovery Center, an outpatient alcohol and drug treatment program in Decatur offered for low-income patients through the Mental Health Center for North Central Alabama, had provided a program for 25 years. It closed in August.

Bill Giguere, the Mental Health Center’s development officer, said the recovery center struggled

financially for three consecutive years.

“After three years it was cut down to the bone, and we couldn’t break even,” Giguere said. “We couldn’t afford it.”

Giguere said the program was funded through the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

“It (Quest Recovery) was a main staple for the services we were able to provide,” Giguere said. “It was very hard for us as an organization to provide those services. To have to close it, it was very difficult. We’ve lost some capacity in the type of services we can provide. There’s never been a shortage of people that need services.”

The Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama still is open. Giguere said the center never denies services, but tells patients there’s a cost associated with services. Last year, 4,500 people were served at the center.

The center has an operating budget of about \$9 million and 180 employees. In 2011, the budget was \$12 million. Giguere said the center has 10 percent fewer staff members than it did three years ago.

He said the center receives about \$86,000 from local governments.

‘It helps’

“It’s not a lot, but it helps because we have to match Medicaid dollars allocated to us,” Giguere said.

Giguere said the center can use contributions from local governments and private donations to match Medicaid funds, thus leveraging small amounts of local money into significant local services.

Of that nearly \$86,000 received, Athens gives \$10,000, Limestone County \$52,500, Hartselle \$2,400, Moulton \$6,000 and Morgan County about \$15,000.

The city of Decatur cut its mental health funds to zero three years ago. The center used to receive \$34,000 a year from the city, Giguere said.

Giguere said the city’s funds helped serve about 28 Decatur residents with mental illness per year.

District 3 Councilman and council President Gary Hammon said the city sent out a survey with pertinent questions and one question asked how much of Decatur’s money is included in the organization’s budget.

“The mental health was less than a tenth of a percent,” Hammon said. “They have about a \$9.5 million budget.”

Hammon said some organizations, such as the Princess Theater and Carnegie Visual Arts Center, depend on city funding.

“We thought they could operate with that (\$9.5 million),” Hammon said. “There are other needs as great, and it really didn’t put a dent in their budget.”

Hammon said the county still provides funding for mental health, which includes Decatur residents’ tax

dollars.

The center's two major funding sources are Medicaid and the state Department of Mental Health. Giguere said to access federal dollars, there has to be a local match.

"When we get zeroed out, we can't even access Medicaid," Giguere said.

Dill said local governments that do not fund mental health services are relying on the state or federal governments to do so.

"Unfortunately people do not think about the importance of mental health services until they are affected by it personally," Libell said.

Giguere said the lack of funding creates hurdles.

'Make it through the day'

"About 65 percent of the adults we serve receive some type of public funding just to make it through the day," he said.

Giguere said Quest served 130 clients who had substance abuse issues last year. He said many clients were from the court system or other social service agencies. He said the center was able to retain about three dozen Quest clients with a dual diagnosis.

Mike Mallette, alcohol and drug counselor at Family Life Center in Decatur, said he has seen an influx of patients since Quest closed. Mallette is the only counselor, and the center has one other staff member that handles drug testing and administrative tasks.

He said he has seen an increase of about five patients a week.

"With this influx of people, it is going to be much more difficult as a counselor to handle them," Mallette said. "I believe in treatment and not crowd control."

Mallette said Family Life Center receives one grant through the drug court. It is Family Life Center's only funding source, and the center does not accept insurance. It cost \$35 per week for services after an initial \$75 assessment.

"With the influx of people, the funding will run out sooner," Mallette said. "We can't counsel for free."