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Sheriff's Office taking role to help county's mentally ill

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Getting help for people in the Wiregrass who are suffering from mental health issues is a never ending task. Ask Houston County Probate Judge Patrick Davenport. He held 750 mental health commitment hearings in 2016.

With that many cases each year, having some additional assistance will not only benefit Davenport, but also people with mental illnesses who are needing help.

The Houston County Commission officially approved implementing the Community Health Officer Program on Monday, which authorizes the Houston County probate judge to appoint members of the Houston County Sheriff's Office to serve as community health officers who can sign to have somebody detained after they've been evaluated at the hospital.

"This is a critical element to meet the needs of the mentally ill in our community," Davenport said.

Davenport said he receives phone calls most nights when there is an issue with a person who may be having a mental health issue that requires them to be evaluated at the behavioral health services unit at Southeast Alabama Medical Center.

With the Community Health Officer Program, Davenport will have a sergeant or lieutenant from the sheriff's office on every shift who is trained to deal with people who have a mental illness. They can determine if a person needs to be taken in to be seen by a physician at SAMC for an evaluation.

"The deputies will respond to the calls that are on the street," Davenport said. "I will still have the judicial overview to protect the individuals' rights to make sure due process is followed."

The program should also keep some mentally ill people from going to jail when they should be receiving mental health treatment. Davenport said some cases that are called in, such as domestic violence, may turn out to be a person suffering a mental issue and the trained sheriff's sergeant or lieutenant will be able to make a more informed decision about what should happen with them in the short term.

"Instead of imprisoning someone who is mentally ill... they have the training to take them to (SAMC)," Davenport said. "It's to get the immediate attention the mentally ill need."

Houston County joins only a handful of Alabama counties to have a Community Health Officer Program. Since Houston County is the hub of the Wiregrass, people often come in from surrounding counties and states, which increases the number of mentally ill people who may be in Houston County and end up needing help.

"It's a significant work load on the probate court because we serve so many counties," Davenport said. "It's a big problem because there are a lot of people in the community, people who live here, but also a reasonably large transient population."

According to the 2015 Alabama Behavioral Health Barometer produced by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 165,000 adults age 18 or older in Alabama (4.5% of all adults) had a serious mental illness in the years 2013-2014, which was just slightly above the national average. The same report showed that between 2010-2014, 334,000 adults who had any mental illness in Alabama received mental health treatment or counseling, but more than 56 percent did not.

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