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Community mental health: 'Prisons are the largest mental hospitals,' says commissioner

Kym Klass, Montgomery Advertiser

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(Photo: Albert Cesare / Advertiser)

The mental health community is a system that must be connected in order to be healthy.

The message from the state's mental health commissioner Lynn Beshear was given at the "Mental Health Summit: The Time is Now, A Day to Discover What Community Mental Health Should Look Like" on Thursday.

Beshear, the fourth mental health commissioner in five years, said for a staff to have such a degree of uncertainty and still keep moving forward is commendable.

Mental Health Commissioner: ['Mental health is not a character flaw' \(/story/news/2017/09/20/lynn-beshear-mental-health-not-character-flaw/682822001/\)](#)

Mental health: [How Alabama is responding \(/story/news/2017/10/06/alabama-mental-health-protect-our-consumers/727493001/\)](#)

"I arrived in the midst of a little uncertainty," she said of her July 2017 appointment, just three months after former Gov. Robert Bentley resigned.

A nurse, Beshear completed her psychiatric training at Dorothea Dix Mental Hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina, and said she has seen human beings "warehoused."

"I have," she said. "Sometimes, I feel like we're back in the 1800s because we know the prisons are the largest mental hospitals in our country."



Lynn Beshear, Alabama Mental health commissioner, speaks during the "Mental Health Summit: A Day to Discover What Community Mental Health Should Look Like" on Thursday, Jan. 11, 2018, in Montgomery, Ala. (Photo: Albert Cesare / Advertiser)

"This is a tragedy on every level. My guiding principal is the only behavior I can change is my own. But if I want other people to do differently, then I have to change what I'm doing. And I see that happening in this room."

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Alabama, the Alabama Council for Behavioral Healthcare and the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program (ADAP) teamed up with the Alabama Department of Mental Health to coordinate the Mental Health Summit at the Embassy Suites to stress the fact that how people use time profoundly impacts the state's mental health system.

More: [Man with schizophrenia gives back to community that served him \(/story/news/2017/03/03/schizophrenic-gives-back-community-who-served-him/98603322/\)](/story/news/2017/03/03/schizophrenic-gives-back-community-who-served-him/98603322/)

More: ['Community Mental Health' should have compassion, ears, patience \(/story/life/2018/01/08/community-mental-health-should-have-compassion-ears-patience/1011714001/\)](/story/life/2018/01/08/community-mental-health-should-have-compassion-ears-patience/1011714001/)

Hundreds of legislators, commissioners, law enforcement personnel, mental health providers and advocates gathered to listen to Beshear, as well as other presenters including Montgomery County Sheriff Derrick Cunningham; Kelly Emerson, executive director of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Alabama; Judge Steve Leifman, associate administrative judge, Miami-Dade County Court; and House Speaker Mac McCutcheon, R-Monrovia.

Everything in mental health is connected, Beshear said.

"I like to think of it like a system, just like your body is made up of a bunch of different systems that all have to connect with each other for you to be healthy and functioning," she said. "So does the community."

In Alabama, she said, there are 1,200 people per behavioral health provider in Alabama.

"We have a workforce problem," she said. "We have a workforce attraction problem. We have fewer people going into medicine, and fewer still going into psychiatry. So we (have) to be very proactive about how we approach that."

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Every day in the Montgomery County Jail, there are more than 100 inmates that are on psychiatric medication, with the department spending close to \$3,000 every month per inmate on that alone.

"This ain't a hospital," he said. "This is a jail. But we learned ... about how we need to segregate those that are suffering with mental illness in our jails. We can't put them with other inmates so they won't be singled out, beat up, agitated.

More: [Corrections increasing mental health spending, looking to add staff \(/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/10/10/corrections-increasing-mental-health-spending-looking-add-staff/750502001/\)](http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/10/10/corrections-increasing-mental-health-spending-looking-add-staff/750502001/)

"That's what we're doing in Montgomery County. But at the same time when we start talking about this, and we start talking about Crisis Intervention Training, we've got to make sure that the officers in that facility are getting that training."

But when talk of training arises, so do the dollar signs, Cunningham said.

"Let me tell you something, we can't afford 'not' to do that," he said of the training.

There will be a healthy increase in mental health in both the trust fund and the general fund budgets, said Senator Del Marsh.

"I just want to be here today to tell you I appreciate what you do," he said. "It's tough in state government, especially the last several years. It has been tight in both budgets in the state."

McCutcheon, a former officer with the Huntsville Police Department, said his law enforcement career helped him experience things including mental health programs and what they are doing for the community.

"We are very excited about the budgets especially with agencies like mental health and some of the issues that you've had to face over the years with the cuts and the reorganization of things that have been going on," he said. "My support is with you as that budget goes through the house."

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