

A team approach to mental health emergencies

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First, the good news.

Recognizing they are the front line when mental health calls must be answered, the Florence Police Department and the Lauderdale County Sheriff's Department are now coordinating their efforts.

Sheriff Rick Singleton said two deputies are receiving training in how to respond to crisis mental health calls. They will coordinate with four Florence officers who have received the training.

Florence pioneered the mental health officer program in 1997 when Singleton was the police chief. Florence was the first city in Alabama to recognize the disturbing trend of state government cutting funding for mental health programs, and police departments being forced to step into the first response role.

Twenty years ago, Florence's sole mental health officer worked the entire county. As time passed, it was clear one was not enough.

With more mental health calls coming into the 911 center, Singleton said it is now clear that responding to those calls is an integral part of contemporary law enforcement.

Now, the bad news.

Alabama has been slashing funding for mental health services and facilities for years, leaving local governments to largely fend for themselves to provide help for families.

Facilities have been closed, services cut, and the Legislature can't find the money to repair the damage.

Like most states, Alabama experienced financial setbacks in the wake of the 2008 recession. Unlike most state, Alabama has been slow to recover, due in part to its antiquated tax code.

Alabama ranks 37th in per capita mental health spending at \$78.19. Clearly, there is room for growth.

Florence Police Chief Ron Tyler said police are not the ideal responders for mental illness calls, but no one else is available. Too often, those experiencing psychotic episodes are jailed because beds are not available in mental health facilities. He said that is the last place someone experiencing those type problems should be housed.

Fortunately, Florence and Lauderdale County are coming to grips with the problem by training officers to make good decisions when confronted with mental health emergencies.

Local governments should not be forced to shoulder a burden that belongs to the state. But until lawmakers find the political will to address taxes, more and more state responsibilities will fall on the steps of city halls and courthouses.

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