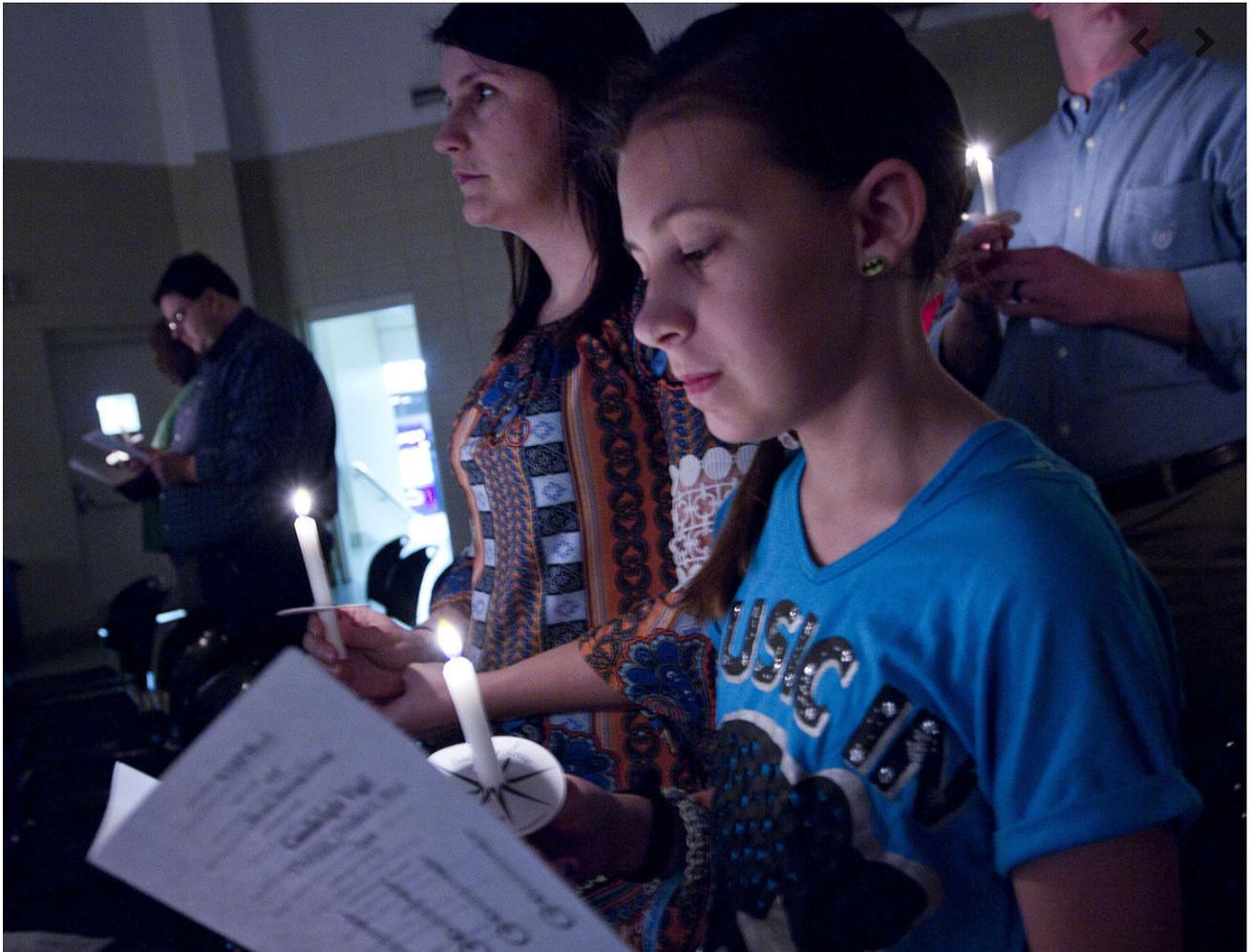


http://www.timesdaily.com/news/local/vigil-focuses-on-call-to-action-with-mental-illness/article_48919bba-8933-5d5d-bf33-5ba12593c8ef.html

SPOTLIGHT

Vigil focuses on call to action with mental illness

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman Staff Writer Updated Oct 7, 2016



Lydia Galloway holds a candle and reads along with a song being performed at Riverbend Center for Mental Health during a National Alliance on Mental Illness Shoals (NAMI Shoals) and Shoals Sharing Group Candlelight Vigil on Thursday night for Mental Illness Awareness Week. JIM HANNON/TIMES DAILY

FLORENCE -- Lauderdale County Sheriff Rick Singleton said with the current state of mental health services in Alabama, the theme for Thursday night's candlelight vigil, "It's Time to Take Action," couldn't be more appropriate.

The 24th annual vigil sponsored by the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Shoals and the Shoals Sharing Group was held at the Riverbend Center auditorium. The event honors mental health services consumers and their families.

The vigil is held yearly in conjunction with mental illness awareness week.

Singleton, who also is the former Florence police chief, had the state's first trained police officers in community mental health. Today, that department has four officers.

Singleton, in his capacity as sheriff, has also been successful in getting two sheriff's deputies trained and is pursuing training for the jail staff.

The keynote speaker for Thursday's event, Singleton said that while everyone understands there's a mental health crisis, no one has solutions. In fact, he said, services from the state level down continue to decrease.

"I've come to realize that we're now in the mental health business," Singleton said, referring to law enforcement agencies. "(Mentally ill) people are being jailed because there's no place for them to go to get help."

Singleton shared an example of a recent case where a mentally ill 23-year-old man was jailed after assaulting his mother. He spent four months in jail in a makeshift isolation cell until he could get the help he needed.

"Our jail certainly doesn't have the adequate facilities to keep these individuals separated from the population to keep them from hurting themselves or others," he said. "It took us all that time to get him moved to a facility where he could get help. Unfortunately, these cases aren't uncommon."

He said the jail population has exploded to the point that the fire marshal's office is constantly monitoring capacity safety.

"Every Monday morning I have to go before the judge and decide on which 8 to 10 people in our jail to let go," he said.

Singleton said he knew when he became sheriff that the office wasn't doing its part where mental health initiatives were concerned.

"It's still not the ideal situation, but it's better to have some officers in the county with training in this area," he said. "The bottom line is we can't expect the state to provide services. We have to rely more on local funding, local governments."

Singleton said he expects to see in the near future a mental health counselor employed to serve the Lauderdale County Detention Center.

Riverbend Center CEO Bryan Libell said he's grateful for NAMI-Shoals and its educational work.

"This group truly lives up to their pledge to provide education to the community," Libell said. "We're likewise fortunate in the Shoals that our law enforcement agencies support our efforts in mental health."

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