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Mental health services need more funding

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The issue

Congress passed the 21st Century Cures Act in 2016, which would increase access to mental health services, but has failed to fund it.

Anyone who lives in Alabama and has friends or family members in need of mental health services knows how difficult it can be to find adequate help. The state, in a perpetual state of budget crisis, cannot fund services at an acceptable level.

The problem is not confined to Alabama. Many states are experiencing similar problems and have turned to Congress for help.

Congress responded in 2016 with the 21st Century Cures Act, which, among other things, would provide grants for intensive early intervention for infants and young people showing signs of mental illness.

The problem with the act is that it remains unfunded. Now, the Republican-controlled Congress is looking at massive tax cuts that put this act and countless other government services at risk of not meeting their goals.

The act grew out of the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School, where 20 children and six adults were gunned down by a mentally ill man. Experts are quick to point out that mental illness and violence do not go hand in hand, but that early intervention can improve the quality of life for those needing services and their families.

The 21st Century Cures Act also created a committee to advise Congress and federal agencies on the needs of adults and children with serious mental illness.

The quality of services is improving, experts say, but the big challenge is finding adequate funding for people to access those services. Without the money, the services too often are not accessible to

those who need them.

Though funding is an issue, there is some hope that private insurance carriers will be required to treat mental health care as in same manner they treat physical health care.

Recently, a new assistant secretary position was created at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The assistant secretary will be dedicated to improving behavioral health care. It is hoped this will open the dialogue with insurers to be more open to mental health care coverage.

Still, states have an obligation to be in the funding mix along with the federal government. In Alabama, just about every state agency has faced funding cuts and budget shortfalls in the wake of the recession. These shortfalls have exposed the failure of Alabama's tax code, and lawmakers in Montgomery must come to terms with the fact new revenue must be created in order to deliver the services their constituents expect.

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