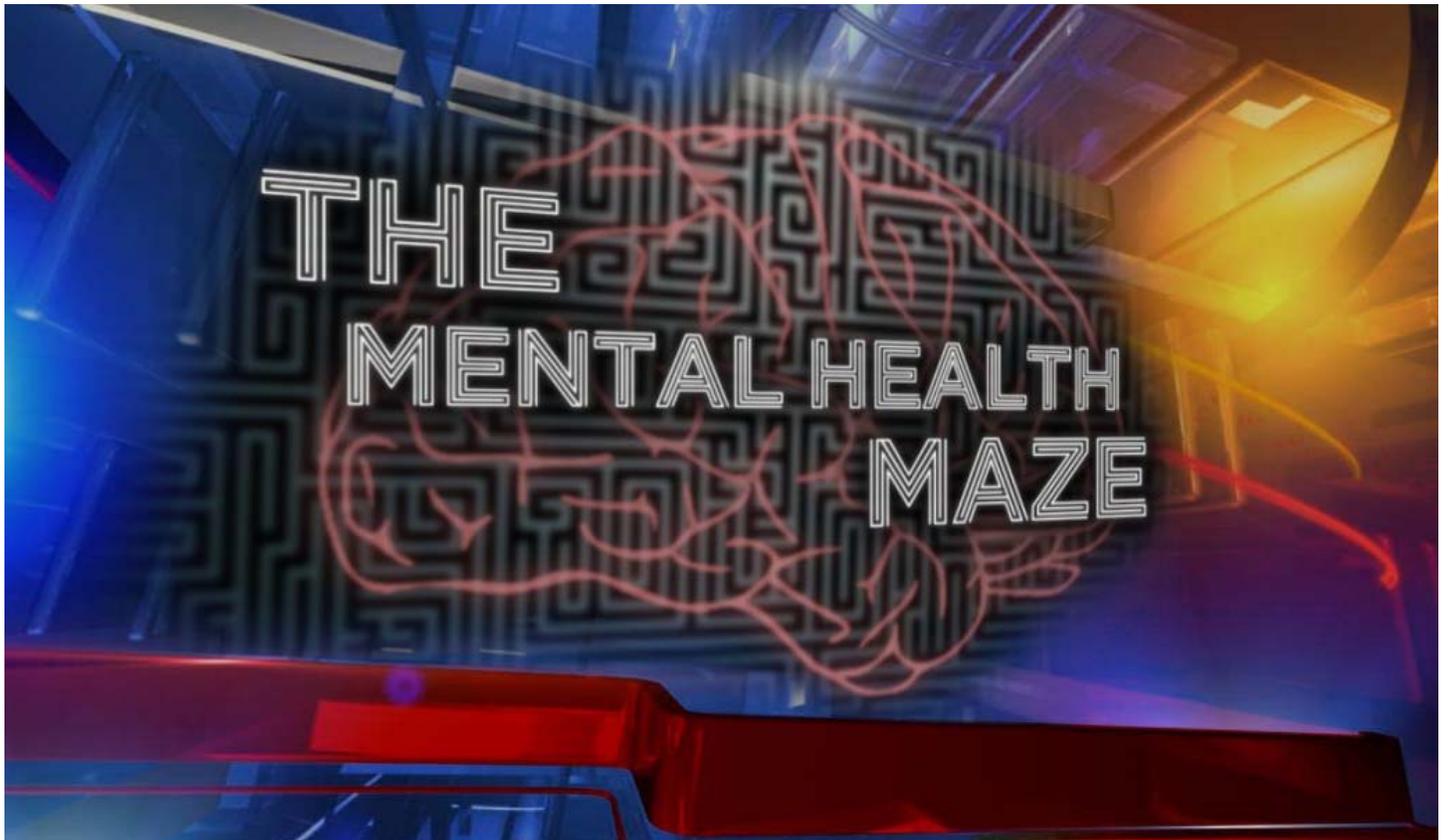


[http://www.waaytv.com/appnews/mental-health-town-hall-wednesday-in-decatur/article\\_c59f4e80-9071-11e6-99a3-2bf9ac280571.html](http://www.waaytv.com/appnews/mental-health-town-hall-wednesday-in-decatur/article_c59f4e80-9071-11e6-99a3-2bf9ac280571.html)

TOP STORY

## Mental health town hall Wednesday in Decatur

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WAAY 31 has teamed up with Wellstone Behavioral Health to offer free advice on mental health concerns on Friday, February 19 from 6 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

With the budget for the Department of Mental Health remaining mostly unchanged from last year to this year, the department is having to get creative to meet increasing needs.

Currently, the state only has three psychiatric hospitals: Bryce Hospital, the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center, and the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility. All of which exist in Tuscaloosa.

That's also down from the original seven.

Legally, the longest that someone can be kept in a facility without rehearing is 150 days, according to Commissioner Jim Perdue. But he said in reality, people are typically kept less than two weeks.

"They are treated and released. And so it creates a revolving door of service and that's what you hear a lot," Perdue said.

He said that without the needed number of beds, many have to stay within the prison system.

"We have turned the prison system, jails, into the de facto delivery for mental illness and that's awful," Perdue said.

Currently at the Morgan County Jail there are roughly 80 inmates that have some type of mental illness. Sheriff Ana Franklin said that creates issues that local law enforcement largely aren't designed to deal with.

"That's certainly a responsibility of ours as sheriffs on the local level and, quite frankly, something that many jails are not prepared, are able or equipped or staffed to be able to do," Franklin said.

One of the solutions that Perdue would like to implement is to start by having staff with the Department of Mental Health be able to assess and treat those who are incarcerated.

Currently, that service is contracted out to independent agencies for between \$12-16 million, according to Perdue.

Further down the road, the commissioner said he would like to see a way for some of the lower level offenders be able to be treated outside of the jail system, which would allow for access to more benefits to help pay for said treatment, like Medicare and Medicaid.

Other non-budget increasing initiatives that Perdue would like to see implemented include consolidating the administrative offices near the hospitals in Tuscaloosa, moving dying prisoners from their cells into a hospital that would be renovated in Mt. Vernon and educating the public more about approaching autism in youth.

Wednesday was the 22 town hall meeting the commissioner has held in the state to try and address ways to improve the mental health system.

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