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Mental health cuts highlight struggles for Huntsville family

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By Margo Gray, Anchor [CONNECT](#)

HUNTSVILLE, AL (WAFF) - Years of cuts to mental health funding in this state have left those who treat and interact with patients with a whole new challenge. We're talking about mental health professionals, law enforcement and, of course, families.

Facilities that remain cannot keep up with the demand. This state had five mental hospitals running at one point.

Over the past five years, one after another was shut down over funding. Now there's only one for long-term patient care serving the entire state: Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa.

No doubt it has saved the state a ton of money closing these hospitals. However, are taxpayers still footing this bill and the biggest cost could be our safety.

"They put the state in a bad position," said Dori Mitchell.

Lawmakers that is, according to Mitchell and her sister, Dawn. They said lawmakers don't have clue about what it takes to treat the mentally ill in Alabama.

They know firsthand because they're the primary guardians for their brother, who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia.

"Now those people who would normally be in the hospital. They're now in the jails," said Dori Mitchell.

Their brother has been there too, right in Madison County's or Huntsville Hospital's emergency room.

"When you have this illness, you're going to go downhill, but at the same time and almost the same rate. How can you really tell which one is really having the impact?" said Dawn Mitchell.

They believe the state has pushed their brother down that hill even faster with the lack of treatment options available.

Over time, they've dealt with shorter involuntary commitment periods, smaller facilities releasing their brother with no medication and weak laws that don't force patients to take their medication.

"Discharging you and pushing you out the door and telling you you're not a danger to yourself or others," said Dawn Mitchell.

She said that is the reality for the challenges families face in this state.

Things became too real when their brother's situation hit front page news.

"In 2003, all the beds were full across the state. So when my brother just happened to be the next one being committed and there is nowhere to take him. When they wouldn't accept him at the door, the police officers called and told the judge they're full, they won't accept him. That's when the judge said handcuff him to the door," said Dori Mitchell.

In 2003, the state still operated five mental hospitals.

According to Wellstone Behavioral Health CEO Brian Davis, lawmakers control what happens next.

"That our state legislators step up and fund the Department of Mental Health to be able to open crisis assessment centers, at least in the major metropolitan population areas of our state," said Davis.

Davis believes these crisis assessment centers could be a third option for law enforcement who encounter mentally ill patients. Cities like Nashville, San Antonio and Kansas City already have them.

"It can keep people out of these revolving doors, in and out of jails, in and out of emergency departments. We just need the resources, the funding in order to pull that off," said Davis.

Pulling it off will take lawmakers putting up \$3 million to \$4 million per year to run a center in each major city.

"When you compare that to the cost to the taxpayer, in a jail cell and the cost of keeping people in jail, it pales in comparison," Davis said.

Dori and Dawn Mitchell say something has to change in Alabama, and that's why they decided to share their story. They say it's a life and death situation for us all and encourage the thousands of families in this same position to talk about it.

"Most people only come forward once something happens. We're trying to be proactive and a lot of people are reactive," said Dori Mitchell.

Both sisters have written letters to lawmakers and the mental health department for years with no response.

Mental health advocates plan to really push lawmakers on funding these crisis assessment centers next year because they can't see anything more important than public safety.

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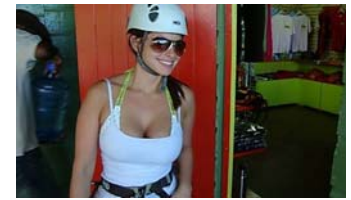


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