



Gov. Robert Bentley celebrates grand opening of new Bryce Hospital facility

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TUSCALOOSA, Alabama -- Gov. Robert Bentley toured the new Bryce Hospital facility in Tuscaloosa Wednesday, May 21, as the staff prepares for their final move next month.

The hospital, which provides inpatient psychiatric services to adults, is one of Alabama's last remaining state-operated mental health facilities.

The \$81 million, 260,000 square-foot facility features 268 patient beds, housed in both single and double rooms, along with offices for staff, dining rooms and day treatment rooms.

Though the average patient's stay is around 180 days, one of the hospital's unit is dedicated to those who require chronic care.

In addition to everyday care, patients will have access to a number of in-house services, including dental care, a barber shop and a vocational area where patients can work and earn money

The facility also includes specialized areas for deaf and hearing-impaired patients. Several cafeterias will service each residential unit, and many patients will have access to a mock apartment, complete with living area and kitchen, to help them learn how to manage their daily needs.

"This is a real hospital and it treats real diseases -- mental illness," Bentley said at the grand opening ceremony. "That disease affects real people, and we need to remember that."

Several speakers made a point to acknowledge the history of the institution, which was considered cutting edge at its inception but later became one of the more notorious institutions in the country due to inhumane levels of care.

"We would be remiss if we didn't take a moment to acknowledge 153 years of continuous service to the state of Alabama served by the old Bryce Hospital," Mental Health Commissioner Jim Reddoch said during the ceremony.

Originally named the Alabama Insane Asylum, the hospital opened its doors in April 1861, where superintendent Peter Bryce admitted his first patient, a soldier, under the diagnosis of "political excitement," Reddoch said. Bryce was recommended to the job by Dorothea Dix, an activist who lobbied for humane treatment of the mentally ill in

state-sponsored institutions.

By 1970, though, the hospital -- renamed in honor of its original superintendent -- had become an inhumane dumping ground, housing more than 5,000 patients. Hal Martin, the editor of *The Montgomery Advertiser*, likened some of the conditions to those of concentration camps he had seen while covering the Nazi war trials.

A lawsuit filed in October 1970 on behalf of a young patient, Ricky Wyatt, led to a landmark ruling establishing nationwide standards of care for mental health patients, which include criteria like humane psychological and physical environment, and qualified and sufficient staff.

In 2010, the state announced plans to sell the hospital to the University of Alabama, which agreed to pay \$72 million and restore the main, historic Bryce building.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health began shuttering institutions around the state, including the Partlow Developmental Center in Tuscaloosa, the state's last residential institution for patients with intellectual disabilities.

Its residents, some of whom had lived there for decades, were transferred to community care facilities, with the last patient moving out in December 2011.

The new Bryce Hospital was built on the Partlow campus.

"I am proud of Alabama's push to move people from institutions to community-based settings for recovery," Bentley said. "For patients who need long-term care, the new Bryce facility is a state-of-the art hospital that will provide great opportunities to help them lead a productive life. We have entered a new era with the opening of this hospital. It is a facility that the Tuscaloosa community, mental health advocates and the state can be proud to support."

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