

# Mental illness is a disease too!

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Local consumers and agency representatives are making their voices heard with looming threats that could devastate the state's mental health system.

A good crowd of clients, loved ones, providers and others gathered for a rally at Convention Hall in Gadsden recently urging Gov. Robert Bentley and the Alabama Legislature not to cut funding for mental health.

According to Bentley, Alabama faces a budgeting loss of \$35.2 million in state funding and \$64 million in federal funding with cuts in mental health services including group homes, outpatient services, psychiatric services and employess at mental health centers.

Shelia Hurley, executive director, C.E. D. (Cherokee-Etowah-Dekalb) mental Health Center, said CED alone could lose up to \$400,000.

"We are a comprehensive mental health center," said Hurley. "On our website, you see over 5,000 served. For this year, we have over 6,000 people we serve. We are the safety net. By that I mean sometimes when you don't see us, you don't realize we are working with the sheriff's office, the probate judge's office, these other service agencies that you heard or the county commission, or other agencies, but we are behind the scenes helping your local providers and local officials provide services for your area. If we end up with a cut that is about \$400,000 for CED. That is a lot of money. That means also cutting a lot of services that sometimes get taken for granted."

"Do you know that we go out on calls with the sheriff's offices?" Hurley asked. "Do you know that we have community service officers? That is not your usual mental health services. The probate judge actually appoints someone to be his community service officer. We have quite a few of those folks."

"So when events happen in your communities that you hear that are in the newspapers and national reports, don't think that does not happen in Alabama," said Hurley. "It does. It happens in our area. The difference is some of the employees are working diligently with the probate judges, with the sheriff's office, with the police departments so we intervene so you don't have those headlines happening. The



## NOT A PARTISAN ISSUE

NOT A PARTISAN ISSUE. Cherokee County Commission Chairman/Probate Judge Kirk Day shares his concerns about mental health issues during a recent rally held at Convention Hall in Gadsden. Day urged legislators to remember that mental illness affects families and to put a face behind mental health rather than thinking of it as just another budgeting or funding matter. Also pictured is Sue Guffey, president of NAMI Alabama.

county commissions are very, very good to us, they are very supportive and the reason they are is because they know about the services we provide. We provide services to children, adults, the elderly, anyone who comes through Cherokee, Etowah and Dekalb counties. So when I said we are the safety net we truly are the safety net.”

Paul Theis of Cherokee County, who was diagnosed with mental illness some 15 years ago, said his passion is making people aware.

“I realized that I really had mental illness all my life,” said Theis. “One of the big things is I think people don’t realize is that so many families actually sweep this under the rug, even the families that are kind of involved with it. You say mental illness and they say ‘oh well, I don’t want the neighbors to know that my son or daughter had this’ so we hide it. That is why we don’t get out there and see the noise or whatever and one of the things people do not realize is that we have researched our bodies so greatly but you know we never research the brain. The brain is the last thing that is being researched. We are just starting to learn what the brain is really doing for us.”

“The other thing to talk about it is actually a brain disorder, so it is an illness,” said Theis. “So many people say ‘well I had cancer’ but if you tell them you have a mental illness, it is like it is no big deal, You can just get over it. I have worked with Sue Guffey. We did NAMI connection and heard so many people wanting to do more but they are scared to do more because they are afraid they are going to hear one more negative than positive.”

“One of the things I want people to realize is I don’t want any of us who have mental illness to be forgotten people,” said Theis. “It is time we are not forgotten. We are here! We don’t have everything we need now!”

“When I learned about me is why I finally got better,” said Theis. “I really understood why I did what I did. It was like ‘Wow, that is why you do what you did!’ I have bipolar but I tell people now I won’t say bi polar is what makes me. I am a person and I am who I am and I am proud of what I do and I am proud I educated myself and I want the people in Alabama, the legislature, to understand that people can get better as long as the funding stays there. They don’t understand that.”

“I made three phone calls guess how many returned calls?” said Theis “Zero! I am important enough! I am a person and if they truly want to talk to me I am here because I know what mental illness does to people and I am proud to say that I am better because of NAMI, Shelia, programs that are that that I go to. I am better because of these people.”

Sue Guffey is a member of the C.E.D. Board of Directors and is president of NAMI Alabama.

“As you heard my nickname is ‘Sue-nami’ and I will run right over you if I can get some help for people who have mental illness or an intellectual disability,” said Guffey. “I have had family members who have suffered and do suffer from mental illness. So it is a passion for me. And I do not want level funding, I want adequate funding. We cannot afford any more cutting. I will be happy to pay more taxes. I have lived in six different states and I can’t tell you the tax structure here is so low and we brag about it instead

of raising taxes so we can have good services.”

Kirk Day serves as Cherokee County Commission Chairman/Probate Judge and a lot of his duties are related to those citizens with mental illness.

“I really can’t tell you how important this issue is to all of us and our entire community,” said Day. “I agree with Rep. Ford. It is not a partisan issue at all. This is doing the right thing for those of us in your community, our brothers, sisters and those in the community who are suffering. Some things are just unconscionable. And this is one of them. You have to provide adequate funding. There should be no excuse for that. I am here just to lend my support and recommend all of you do contact all of your representatives and say this is an important thing. And it is something you just cannot afford to shortchange. You have my support.”

“As an individual I really did not know a lot about mental illness to begin with until I started interacting with individuals and friends,” said Day. “I was in the military. It is easy to sit down there making the budget or latch on to political philosophy. But they need to understand there is a human face to it. They need to understand your story. All these elected officials, regardless of party, do have their face book page, social media. Let them know your story.”

“It is your life, it is your loved ones’ lives,” said Day. “I had friends who suffered from mental illness. I just look at them as having a condition like any other condition. The organ is here (points to the brain) and not here (points to the heart). It is a non-partisan issue. It was no bed of roses in this state for mental health for 136 years before. It is a thing of society and I took time to educate myself, had some help with NAMI And Mrs. Sue NAMI! You learn from each other. I just encourage you, let’s get to the headlines and let your story be told. There are some things you have to draw a line in the sand on and this is one of them. This is absolutely one of them. Just tell your stories and let your voice be heard. They are going to realize the affect to the entire society.”