

North Alabama Regional Hospital closed after 38 years of treating mentally ill

By Keith Clines Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, June 29, 2015 12:15 am

North Alabama Regional Hospital's last patient was transferred last week, and the staff is in the process of closing the center that treated the mentally ill for 38 years.

The hospital, located on U.S. 31, was scheduled to close next week, but the hospital's director last month said the hospital would close early if beds were found for the 21 patients in the hospital at the time.

"All of the patients are gone now," Dr. Barbara Jackson, the hospital's director, said Thursday. "We're just in the closure mode. We were able to find them appropriate places before the 30th."

State Mental Health Commissioner Jim Reddoch announced in January the hospital, which opened in 1977, would close. It quit taking patients March 1.

The closing of the 74-bed facility created problems placing people with mental illness in treatment facilities, Morgan County Probate Judge Greg Cain said.

"We are having to hold folks at Decatur (Morgan Hospital) West at the present time until we have a bed at a state facility," said Cain, who holds commitment hearings for the mentally ill.

Cain said it's not uncommon for a patient to stay at Decatur Morgan Hospital West campus, which is a psychiatric facility on Beltline Road Southwest, two or three days waiting on a state bed to become available. Decatur Morgan West is an acute treatment facility and is not a designated mental health facility, Cain said.

Jackson said the last 21 patients were transferred to either a crisis stabilization unit, which are short-term facilities with 16 beds, or a group home. Acute patients stay in the units until they are stable enough to be released or moved to a group home.

Ann Denbo, the longtime president of the Friends of North Alabama Regional Hospital, said she hopes there will be enough beds in the crisis stabilization units for all the patients who need treatment.

"The dream for mental health in the 40 years I've been dealing with it is to provide services in the patient's community," she said. "I don't know how this is going to turn out."

The nearest crisis stabilization units are in Cullman, Huntsville, Anniston and Jasper.

"That's fairly close for consumers, but it's still out of town," Denbo said.

Saving money, federal directives to get patients out of large institutions and a declining demand for beds in the hospital were reasons for the closing, Reddoch said in January.

The state was spending about \$11 million a year to run North Alabama Regional Hospital.

The state has three mental health hospitals, all in Tuscaloosa, with the closing of North Alabama Regional. Several other state mental health hospitals have been closed in recent years.

Jackson and 12 remaining employees are cleaning, performing an inventory of equipment and destroying non-medical files and papers, Jackson said. She said it may take another month to completely close the hospital.

“It’s a huge job,” she said.

Most of the hospital’s 150 employees have retired, transferred to other state facilities or found jobs in the private sector, Jackson said. Between 35 and 40 employees were laid off, she said.

Jackson, the hospital’s director for two years, will become acting director of Taylor Hardin Secure Facility in Tuscaloosa.

She likened the closing process to “being in mourning.”

“It’s one of the hardest things I will have ever done,” Jackson said. “You get attached to the people. You get attached to the staff. You get attached to the area. You get attached to the patients.”

The hospital did “an excellent job” for the community, but could not have done it without the community’s support, Jackson said.

“It’s sad to see it close,” Denbo said.

Friends of North Alabama Regional Hospital raised money to provide things for the hospital that the state couldn’t afford, said Denbo, the group’s president for “102 years.”

The group built ballfields and greenhouses, bought televisions and video games, and sponsored picnics and ice cream parties for the hospital, Denbo said.

“It was just something we did that was needed,” she said.

Denbo thanked the Friends board members and everyone who worked with the group for their help.

“It wasn’t always easy raising funds for a mental health hospital,” she said.