

Alabama health officials slowing down closure of mental health hospitals

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By **Casandra Andrews, Press-Register**



(AP Photo/Department of Mental Health) This May 2008 file photograph released by the Alabama Department of Mental Health shows historic Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

MOBILE, Alabama -- The timeline for closing most of the state's mental hospitals is being reconsidered and construction put on hold on a new hospital in Tuscaloosa, officials said today.

Gov. Robert Bentley and Alabama Department of Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh said during a meeting in Montgomery they are easing up on a plan first announced almost a month ago.

That proposal would have closed Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon, Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery and North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur by Sept. 30 and eliminated more than 900 jobs.

Now, officials are re-evaluating whether to keep some of those hospitals open at least temporarily, and have lifted the September deadline.

"At this point we have removed any deadlines or definitive timelines," said Tony Thompson, spokesman for the state Department of Mental Health.

In addition, the state agency also has halted work on an \$81 million psychiatric hospital designed to replace the aging Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa.

"He still supports and is still going forward with the plan to move patients into community and close state hospitals," Thompson said of Bentley.

Meanwhile, Thompson said, the state is working to make sure the infrastructure is in place to ensure that patient and public safety issues are addressed when the hospitals close.

"We're also concentrating our efforts on helping employees getting other state jobs or whatever we can do for them," Thompson said. "We're working with public and private sector organizations to see what might be available."

Under the plan, that unnamed Tuscaloosa hospital would have been the only remaining facility besides one that houses only geriatric patients, and would also have taken those patients committed to the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility.

Plans called for closing Taylor Hardin sometime next year, an answer to the state's budget crisis. Baugh said the only way to protect community mental health services was to stop pouring money into aging hospitals by moving most patients outside of state institutions.

The state has been working for at least a decade, Thompson said, to reduce the number of patients in state mental health hospitals: "This really gives us an opportunity to continue" moving forward with community-based plans "where true recovery happens."

In the Mobile area, AltaPointe Health Systems provides mental health and substance abuse treatment to about 13,000 patients annually. The vast majority are mentally ill.

The AltaPointe system has inpatient and outpatient programs, operating the 96-bed BayPointe Hospital in Mobile. Altapointe also plans to open a 90-bed hospital in Daphne, which will be called EastPointe, in late spring.

Tuerk Schlesinger, AltaPointe chief executive officer, said he supports the plan: "We're in a position to help the state reduce institutional care by expanding services in the community. We already have an infrastructure of hospitals, residential and outpatient services we can build on."

Mobile resident Jeff Ridgeway, president of People First of Alabama, is an advocate for those with physical and mental disabilities.

"I am all for community-based services," Ridgeway said, "but there is a small percentage of people with disabilities that will require more constant care. I think this is going to be a real test to see how well the community can serve a disability population."

Birmingham News reporter Hannah Wolfson contributed to this report.