

69°
H: 82° L: 57°

Feedback

Thursday, May 23, 2013

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Credible. Compelling. Complete.

Sign Out

Search Site



LATEST HEADLINES

HOME / NEWS

advertisement

Resize text A | A | A

State to shutter South Georgia mental hospital

Posted: 6:14 p.m. Wednesday, May 22, 2013

Related

[Perils in personal care homes](#)

BY [MISTY WILLIAMS](#) - THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

The state's behavioral health agency said Wednesday it plans to shutter one of its mental hospitals in South Georgia by the end of the year.

The closure of Southwestern State Hospital in Thomasville is part of a larger, ongoing effort to move hundreds of Georgians with developmental disabilities and mental health problems out of institutions and into their communities.

The move comes as Georgia is in the third year of a five-year agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice that calls for the state to move to a community-based system of care after an investigation revealed the abuse and deaths of dozens of patients in state psychiatric facilities. The state has closed its mental hospital in Rome and drastically reduced services at its hospital in Milledgeville in recent years.

While the agreement doesn't specifically require the state to close its mental hospitals, it doesn't make financial sense to serve a small population of people on a large campus, said Matt Carrothers, a spokesman for the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities. The Thomasville facility had 116 patients as of Wednesday.

There are no immediate plans to close any other facilities, Carrothers said.

"We will always evaluate our services to ensure that they meet the complex needs of the individuals we serve," he said.

The department also is ramping up community-based services in the region, including new crisis stabilization units for mentally ill patients in Valdosta and Thomas County. The state has been rolling out community-based services in other areas of Georgia as part of the settlement agreement.

Georgia needs to modernize its mental health system, and the settlement is helping the state do that, said Cynthia Wainscott, a mental health advocate in Bartow County.

"The new science is capable of treating and supporting people in the community, so they can rejoin society as productive members," Wainscott said. "This is one giant step in that direction."

The rollout of new community services in recent years has been bumpy. Advocates need to be vigilant to make sure the state has enough of those services in place when it closes institutions, she said.

Recently, Frank Berry, commissioner of the behavioral health department, instituted a 45-day delay in moving people with developmental disabilities out of hospitals and into community services such as group homes because of quality of care concerns.

The department is evaluating those services to make sure people are getting the highest quality of care possible, Carrothers said.

Moving people out of institutions is a long process, said Eric Jacobson, executive director of the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities. Some of them have very complex conditions; there is also a lack of community providers, especially in rural areas, Jacobson said.

"You want to make sure they're safe and having a good life," he said.

Wainscott said she's pleased the department slowed down the pace of moving people out, even though it's risky in terms of meeting timelines required in the settlement agreement.

"They're saying the quality is more important than the schedule," she said. "We're going to get it right."

A hidden shame

In January 2007, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution began a yearlong series of articles that revealed more than 100 patients of Georgia's state psychiatric hospitals had died under suspicious circumstances during the previous five years. In response to the articles, the U.S. Justice Department opened an investigation into whether the state was violating the civil rights of hospital patients and others in the mental health system. State and federal officials reached an agreement last year that calls for wholesale changes, including a new emphasis on community-based care.

All Comments (4)

Post a Comment

Comment(s) 1-4 of 4



Bernie31

[Report](#)

This is a Crime Shame and embarrassment to the entire State of Georgia!

Governor Deal does not deserve Re-election for a second term at ALL!

All of these Georgians who now must suffer without the needed Medical Care, Treatment and Medicines they need.

8:00 p.m. May. 22, 2013



vespajet

[Report](#)

Bernie31, the term is "crying shame"... In addition, the patients are still going to be taken care of, it's just that they will be in smaller community-based facilities like group homes instead of in these mental hospitals. These mental hospitals are a relic of an age in which "experts" thought that that these hospitals/asylums/sanitariums were the best way to address mental health issues. These facilities were more or less prisons for people with mental issues that perhaps did not need to be in these facilities but at the time, keeping people locked away in these