

Sacramento County budget cuts change mental health treatment

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Thousands of mentally ill people who have been cut from county programs during the past year are straining the area's health system, with hospitals and private clinics struggling to fill gaps in care.

Psychotic patients are crowding [emergency rooms](#), facing long waits for care and triggering safety concerns, officials said.

County [Mental Health Director Mary Ann Bennett](#) said the cuts to county programs have prompted providers and administrators to consider new ways of delivering critical services.

In the future, she said, more patients may get federally funded care or treatment at smaller psychiatric clinics scattered throughout the county.

"We're booked," said [Robert Caulk](#), executive director of The Effort, a nonprofit outpatient health clinic in midtown [Sacramento](#) that is getting spillover county mental patients. "We have picked up 1,000 new patients since July. We have hired three new psychiatrists, but we can't do it fast enough."

During the past year, the county has shuttered the crisis unit at its [Mental Health Treatment Center on Stockton Boulevard](#), and closed 50 of the facility's 100 inpatient beds. The center handles the most severe psychiatric patients in the county.

During the same period, the area's four nonprofit "regional support teams," funded by the county to provide outpatient care to people with severe mental illness, each cut their client loads from 2,000 to 900. Administrators referred patients elsewhere but don't know how they are faring, said [John Buck](#), chief executive officer at [Turning Point Community Programs](#).

Some are bouncing back to regional support teams for help, said Buck. "Some, I fear, are running out of medication and ending up in emergency rooms."

"Many have just given up and are out on the streets," said [George Ehrlick](#), 61, a former county patient now getting care for his depression and anxiety at The Effort. He said some

patients who had beaten addictions are doing drugs again, and he knows of former county patients suspected of taking their own lives.

Ehrlick himself stopped taking his medications for months after he was cut from the county-funded program he'd been in for seven years. "When I came to The Effort I was a basket case," he said.

Since [Sacramento County](#) began cutting services at its mental health center, area emergency departments have seen a 65 percent increase in psychiatric patients, said [Scott Seamons](#) of the Hospital Council of [Northern](#) and [Central California](#).

"The public should know that they are going to see more people out of control in the ERs," Seamons said. At any given time, emergency rooms are holding 12 to 15 mental patients.

As a result, said Bill Sandberg, executive director of the Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society, ERs are beefing up security and psychiatric staffing. "I have never seen emergency department directors so worried," he said.

UC Davis Medical Center, located across the street from the county mental health center, is bearing the biggest load, but all hospitals are being affected, Sandberg said.

"Psychiatric patients experiencing flare-ups used to go to the mental health treatment center. Now they're coming to us, and at first we were not prepared," said Dr. Debra Kahn, a UC Davis psychiatrist.

Only the sickest patients are admitted for inpatient care, she said, and "we are maxing out all of the outpatient resources" to accommodate everyone else.

The Effort is receiving many of them.

The waiting room at the J Street clinic is constantly crowded with former county patients, many "in a state of desperation," said Dr. Brad Briercheck, a psychiatrist.

"They're having suicidal thoughts, they're unstable, they're off of their medications," he said. Those in crisis are sent directly to hospitals.

The Effort is better prepared than most to handle the deluge of new patients because its clinic is a Federally Qualified Health Center, making it eligible for certain grants and boosting its Medicare and Medi-Cal reimbursement.

Jonathan Porteus, The Effort's clinical director, said the county should consider a similar approach. "It would be a great alternative to the county funding mental health," he said.

Officials are pondering the idea, said Bennett. Opening a series of smaller county clinics for patients who qualify for Medi-Cal also is a possibility, she said. One such clinic, with 12 beds, is ready to open in Carmichael, she said.

"Anytime you make reductions of the magnitude that we have made, you're going to have a big impact on services and clients, and that's very sad," Bennett said.

"But all of this has forced some really creative thinking ... Maybe some positive things will come out of all of this."

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