

Closing NWGA Regional could create “mess” for Gordon County: But if done right, new options could be successful

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When Northwest Georgia Regional Hospital closes its doors on June. 30, the results could be “horrid” for Calhoun and Gordon County, according to one local mental health professional.

Northwest Georgia Regional Hospital in Rome has about 180 patients and 764 employees, according to Tom Wilson, spokesman for the state Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities.

Wilson said the closure is part of a 5-year plan to move developmentally disabled and mentally ill patients to private settings and community-based services. The agreement lays aside a Department of Justice lawsuit against the state of Georgia under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Travis Hurd, a licensed clinical social worker with Calhoun Counseling Center and a former employee of the NWGA Regional, said there could be complications with placing patients once the hospital is closed.

Hurd said he also works as a mobile crisis evaluator who goes to area hospitals to evaluate mental health patients in the emergency rooms to determine if they can be stabilized enough for outpatient help or if they need to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital.

“If they don’t get accepted into a (psychiatric) hospital, they stay in the ER,” he said. Hurd said while working as an evaluator, he saw firsthand how desperate patients can get when they aren’t placed in the proper facility.

“One patient waited in an ER for four days without getting admitted and he hung himself in the hospital,” Hurd said.

Gordon Hospital, he said, however, is well-prepared for possible upcoming situations with special facilities for such patients, he said.

One issue he sees is the need for a secure facility for violent patients. Non-violent patients might be able to get a bed at Treatment and Services of Highland Rivers of Dalton, or RTU in Cedartown, but for those who pose a threat, the next closest locked facility is Atlanta Regional Hospital in Dekalb County.

NWGA Regional also houses patients who are awaiting mental health screening for trials or those found guilty by reason of insanity. Those patients would have to be transferred to a Milledgeville hospital, then brought back for their criminal hearings.

State Rep. Katie Dempsey, R-Rome, serves on the state's Behavioral Health Coordinating Council.

She said the Rome facility is the only one immediately closing as part of a settlement agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice regarding treatment of patients in the state's seven psychiatric hospitals.

"But there's certainly the requirement to deliver services differently in the future," she said.

If it's not successful, Hurd said, more mentally ill patients could end up in jail.

"You can't just treat someone with a mental illness the same way you treat a criminal," he said.

While Hurd said he can see closing the hospital being a "big mess," he also said if the county handles the money saved wisely, there is potential for those services can be replaced.

He said in Virginia, money from similar closings went to private hospitals which are better staffed. The money covered the care for the indigent patients who needed to be in a secure facility. He estimates that NWGA Regional gets about \$300 per day, per patient for care, the money is significant.

"If it's applied toward those that can be locked and take indigent patients, it could be successful," he said.

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