

Hospital shutdown strains system

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Published: February 9th, 2006 02:30 AM

Hospital shutdown strains system Local emergency rooms are being strained by last month's state-ordered shutdown of the county's psychiatric hospital, Puget Sound Behavioral Health.

With the hospital no longer accepting patients, people with severe psychiatric conditions are waiting in emergency rooms for up to 24 hours for beds to open elsewhere. When they do, they're often as far away as Yakima or Spokane.

The backup also means longer waits for other ER patients.

That's part of what the Pierce County Council heard Wednesday at a meeting called to troubleshoot the local mental health system.

The hospital was shut down after state inspectors found poor-quality food and not enough staffers to care for the sometimes-violent patients. Some workers were being let go in preparation for reopening the hospital as an "evaluation and treatment center," still an inpatient psychiatric unit, but with fewer beds and physical medical services.

"There clearly has been a meltdown in the way services are provided," said Councilman Sean Bunney. "(We need) to find out what caused it and what needs to be changed as a result."

The council, which was excluded from the decision to transform the hospital into a lower-cost treatment center, also wants a say in mental health decisions by County Executive John Ladenburg, who has ultimate control of the local mental health system, and his employee, Fran Lewis, who runs the system as head of the Pierce County Regional Support Network.

The network gets about \$49 million a year to provide services, said Dave Daniels, operations chief in the mental health wing of the state Department of Social and Health Services. Of that, \$16 million comes from the state with strings attached, including how much must go to outpatient versus inpatient uses and other areas.

Lewis has more discretion with the balance, a blend of state and federal money, Daniels said.

About 25 people testified Wednesday before a standing-room-only crowd of about 90 at the City-County Building. Among them were mental health workers and advocates, as well as a few patients and family members.

Most said they were grateful the county mental health system was as good as it was, even with the problems, and urged continued local control, instead of contracting the system out to a managed-care company, one possible option.

From council members' questions, though, it was clear they have concerns about the system's leadership and spending priorities, getting the treatment center opened as quickly as possible and ensuring that the switch from a hospital to a treatment center saves the county money, as Lewis and others suggest.

On the leadership issue, the council heard from state officials that most county regional support networks have governing boards of three to 12 people, including tribal representation. Pierce County's network board consists of



Pierce County Councilman Shawn Bunney listens to public comment about county mental health services.



PHOTOS BY LUI KIT WONG/THE NEWS TRIBUNE
Eleanor Owen tells the Pierce County Council on Wednesday that the county needs to provide treatment for mentally ill people rather than sending them to jail.

Ladenburg and his chief of staff, Lyle Quasim, according to Councilwoman Barbara Gelman, who chaired the meeting. “The governing board needs to have more depth and breadth,” she said.

“We look at that issue,” Ladenburg said later. He did not attend the meeting.

Regarding possible financial savings, they will come primarily because the treatment center will have fewer beds than the hospital – about 30 instead of 43 – and will require fewer doctors and other high-cost staffers.

Most counties already have evaluation and treatment centers, and find beds in them cost about \$500 a day or less to maintain, roughly half of the cost at Puget Sound Behavioral Health, Ladenburg said.

A 16-bed detox unit is scheduled to open along with the treatment center, but it’s being paid for by grant money.

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