

# The Times-Picayune

## **Mental health system to get help**

### **State to stem crisis with \$90 million plan**

Wednesday, February 27, 2008

By John Pope

**Staff writer**

Describing Louisiana's storm-battered mental-health service network as "a system that is in crisis," the state's health secretary Tuesday unveiled a combination of short- and long-term initiatives expected to cost nearly \$90 million.

Empowered by an executive order from Gov. Bobby Jindal, Health and Hospitals Secretary Alan Levine has established a task force led by the former head of Florida's prison system to study what the Metropolitan Human Services District is doing in the area it serves -- Orleans, Plaquemines and St. Bernard parishes -- and develop an exhaustive plan to improve it.

That report should be ready in three months, Levine said in a news conference at the state-owned New Orleans Adolescent Hospital on State Street.

But, he said, that document will be only one part of an exhaustive makeover of a system that lost 80 percent of its psychiatrists in the New Orleans area, as well as dozens of psychiatric beds, after Hurricane Katrina.

"This is a journey," Levine said. "This is going to be an ongoing process."

The result will be better than what is available, Levine said, adding that the current system "self-perpetuates its problems."

### **Avoiding a takeover**

The Metropolitan Human Services District, which has borne responsibility for mental health services, has failed to deliver on plans to improve psychiatric care. Its executive director, Jerome Gibbs, has resigned, and the agency has been plagued by staff turnover.

Despite the executive order that puts Levine in charge, he said the state health department will work with the agency and not take it over. However, the agency will continue to operate because, he said, Jindal is "absolutely committed" to the concept of district health organizations.

But, he said, the district's available money, about \$34 million, will be spent first.

The core of this initiative will be what Levine called a transformation team, led by retired Army Col. James McDonough, a West Point graduate who ran not only Florida's prison system but also its drug-control office. He also worked in the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy during the Clinton administration.

Working with him will be three Louisianians: Herman Bignar, a specialist in developmental disabilities; Dr. Rochelle Head-Dunham, a psychiatrist specializing in treating substance abuse; and Anthony Speier, director of disaster mental-health operations in the state Office of Mental Health.

Before their report is submitted, department spokesman Bob Johannessen said programs in 11 areas will be started at once, including community-based treatment; housing subsidies so mentally ill people who can live on their own can afford to do so; specialists in problems of children and teenagers; the 911 system; crisis intervention; a team providing mobile clinical treatment; and regional centers for evaluating people who are brought in for emergency care.

"This is an amazingly comprehensive and effective program that not only will improve access but will improve quality of care," said Dr. Donald Erwin, chairman of the Metropolitan Human Services District board. "To a beleaguered board, this is manna from heaven."

These activities will add \$89.7 million to the budget for the fiscal year that will start July 1, including \$26 million for new mental-health initiatives in New Orleans, Johannessen said.

#### Mobile teams launched

Some of these initiatives have worked elsewhere. For instance, the Jefferson Parish Human Services Authority, which was established almost two decades ago, created two community-treatment teams after Katrina to work closely with people who are severely mentally ill.

"The team essentially takes responsibility for that person," said Gay LeBlanc, a director with the agency.

The mobile team goes to clients' homes and helps them with their mental illnesses, employment problems or housing needs. Members of the team include social workers, nurses and employment counselors.

When the Jefferson Parish authority received emergency financing in May 2006, it was able to form two teams that provided such support for 200 patients, said Jennifer Kopke, the authority's executive director.

But, she said, the agency received less money this year and was forced to cut back to one team.

In addition to the agenda Levine outlined Tuesday, the department will back three bills as part of the makeover of the mental health program. The measures would create uniform criteria for health service districts, increase the opportunities for outpatient treatment and establish standards for regional centers that help people in crisis.

To provide all these services to an area where studies have shown that substantial numbers of people have psychiatric problems, scores of mental health specialists will have to be imported to make up for those whom Katrina drove away. Although Jindal has instituted a freeze on hiring state employees, it does not apply to people who provide health care.

The new array of programs should help lure people to Louisiana, Levine said.

"People need to see that we're serious about addressing these problems," he said.

.....

Staff writer Laura Maggi contributed to this article.

John Pope can be reached at [jpope@timespicayune.com](mailto:jpope@timespicayune.com) or at (504) 826-3317.