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'D' for state in mental health

The Jackson Sun

The National Alliance on Mental Illness downgraded Tennessee's public mental health system from a C to a D, in a report card released Wednesday.

The lower grade is due to looming budget cuts for services to people who are not on TennCare and for mental health services to low-income uninsured adults with severe mental illness, according to Sita Diehl, executive director of the state's organization.

Diehl said although she is disappointed with the lower rating, she believes it is deserved.

One of the issues facing the department stems from 16,000 patients that were transferred from State-only and Judicial TennCare Coverage to the Department of Mental Health on Jan. 1, Diehl said. TennCare spent \$43 million on these patients in the 2007-2008 fiscal year.

TennCare provided the Department of Mental Health with \$5.9 million in funds to cover the patients until July 1, but the department has not been given additional funding. The patients will continue to be provided with basic care, Diehl said, but it will have to come from existing funds.

"Tennessee has been a very innovative state, doing a lot of good things with a little," Diehl said. "But we can't do everything with nothing."

Grading the States 2009 is a follow-up to a report by the National Alliance on Mental Illness published three years ago to measure the progress of states in achieving the goals of a presidential commission that called for transformation of the mental health care system.

The report card is based on 65 criteria including access to medication, housing, family education and support to National Guard members. It includes policy recommendations for federal and state leaders. State governments provided most of the information on which the grades are based.

"At a time when economic stressors will drive more people into depression and other mental illnesses, our state cannot afford to make mental health care even harder to get," Diehl said. "We need to help our citizens before they reach the breaking point, not wait until after preventable tragedies have occurred."

On the Net

www.nami.org/grades2009
