

Mid-South criticized on mental care

Group lowers grades for Tenn., Ark., Miss.

By Daniel Connolly

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Mid-South states are doing a worse job of treating the mentally ill and that is likely to lead to future problems, leaders of an advocacy group said Friday.

The [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) downgraded Tennessee's grade from a "C" three years ago to a "D" Friday.

And it lowered grades for Arkansas and Mississippi from "D" to "F." The national average was "D" -- the group didn't give any state an "A."

NAMI's report on Tennessee warns that possible state budget cuts this year "would be devastating for an already under-funded mental health system." A breakdown of community mental health services could make it harder for mentally ill to receive services, said Sita Diehl, executive director of NAMI Tennessee.

"So they end up unmedicated, untreated on the street," she said.

NAMI said budget cuts could lead to 32,000 mentally ill people losing TennCare coverage, but that figure was dismissed by a state representative.

"We have no idea where this number comes from," TennCare spokeswoman Kelly Gunderson said. "TennCare has no plans to eliminate coverage for any individual who qualifies for the program."

Scott Pierce, chief financial officer for the TennCare health insurance program for the poor and disabled, took issue with NAMI's criticism of restrictions on prescription drugs and said they were necessary to curb out-of-control spending on medicines.

"There are a lot of ways where this is still more generous than many states," he said. He also said limits on drugs apply only to adults, not children.

The NAMI report on Tennessee also pointed out some bright spots, including "strong leadership" at the state department of mental health and developmental disabilities, the creation of special housing for people with mental illness, and new crisis stabilization units in Nashville and other cities.

The report also praised the Memphis Police Department's crisis intervention team, which trains officers to deal with the mentally ill and has inspired similar programs around the country.

NAMI criticized Arkansas for a lack of police crisis intervention teams, jail diversion programs and mental health courts, but said the state has good data-collection systems and is trying to improve inpatient care for the mentally ill.

Arkansas spokeswoman Julie Munsell said she doesn't dispute the criticisms in the NAMI report.

She said the state has focused on services to children and has begun to start expanding services to adults.

"I think we are on the verge of turning the corner of the adult side," she said.

NAMI criticized Mississippi for holding people in jail who have been committed for treatment and for a lack of community-based supports, but the advocates praised efforts to create a crisis intervention team and to create two rural regions for telepsychiatry.

"We agree with the urgent needs NAMI discussed and these items are being addressed in our strategic plan," the Mississippi Department of Mental Health said in a statement that detailed its efforts.

"We believe the Department has made great strides in improving mental health in Mississippi over the past three years. We also know there are still many improvements needed."

Among other things, the state aims to expand its community-based services.

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NAMI

To read NAMI's state-by-state report, visit nami.org



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