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## Mendocino County sheriff proposing new county mental health facility

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Mendocino County Sheriff Tom Allman has had enough of the local mental health problem, and he plans to do something about it with an idea that county voters may have a chance to consider during the November 2016 election.

Allman said tackling mental health is atop the list of goals for the Sheriff's Office in 2016, and his idea is to place a measure on the general election ballot to see if the community wants to spend tax dollars to build a new county mental health facility – specifically, a half-cent sales tax increase for a maximum of five years that could bring in \$22 million for new infrastructure.

Mendocino County closed its mental health facility in 1999, otherwise known as the “PHF Unit,” or puff, and since then there hasn't been long-term inpatient care for mentally ill people locally.

The system of privatized county mental health care nowadays involves trying to find patients beds at other facilities, typically located out-of-county, some of which are 100 miles away and may take time to line up – meaning until then, mentally ill people tend to spend days stuck in a hospital bed or in the county jail before being placed into long-term care.

Although he concedes that right now there is no specific location in mind as to where this facility would sit, Allman said he envisions it near the Ukiah Valley Medical Center, as a partnership with hospital and county staff, who are generally in the same boat as the Sheriff's Office when dealing with local mentally ill people on a daily basis.

He said it would be staffed by aggressively prioritizing the local mental health crisis response, and hopefully a group of local citizens could come together and oversee the facility and make recommendations to the Board of Supervisors.

“With a \$20 million mental health budget, we deserve to be in the driver's seat,” Allman said. “Right now, Mendocino County government can't figure out how to treat mentally ill people. We're really lacking in mental health crisis services.”

The idea has been thrown around for years by county and hospital staff of the Frank R. Howard Memorial Hospital in Willits, to use the old facility that was recently vacated when the new hospital opened in October, to be utilized in the future for an inpatient facility not operated or purchased by the county, but likely by one of its mental health contractors.

Ortner Management Group has previously shown interest in such a project, although no timeline has been proposed for the purpose of moving forward.

However, the greater Mendocino County community continues to lose confidence in the county's mental health contractors by the day. There is also a plan by the county to review the current mental health contracts, a decision which may or may not allow Ortner to stick around for the long haul.

Margie Handley, a member of the county's Behavioral Health Board, and president of the Frank R. Howard Foundation, contends the old Willits hospital would make a perfect location for a new mental

recommendations and updates to the Behavioral Health Board supporting the idea.

“I see no reason to build something new when we





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have something that will work at a lot less cost," she said.

Allman, though, is tired of waiting for promises of individualized crisis care. He said in the meantime, the Sheriff's Office continues to allocate resources toward dealing with mental health calls.

He estimated that in 2015, deputies spent 1,000 hours on emergency mental health calls that technically weren't related to a crime, which in

retrospect, is 1,000 hours that weren't spent toward county communities, and less time, for example, in strategizing with other law enforcement agencies in combating domestic violence, or teaming more with local schools, he said.

Allman said he longs for the day the Sheriff's Office doesn't have to spend the majority of its resources dealing with mental health, but only when deputies can be replaced by quality mental health staff.

"At 2 a.m. when someone calls and says that someone is about to do something stupid, the best thing we can do is send somebody with a gun and badge," he said.

### STATE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

The Sheriff's Office learned in November it was not going to receive a \$20 million award it had applied for from an available \$500 million funding pool under Senate Bill 863 and administered by the Board of State Community Corrections.

Allman and staff were planning to use the award to construct an unconnected building on the property of the existing county jail that would have separated mentally ill inmates and serious offenders from the rest of the jail population, while adding room for expanded jail programs.

These designated funds were for inmates going through the criminal justice system, and separate from Allman's new idea of a community mental health hospital.

Allman said in November he was going to appeal the decision with the state if any questionable scoring was found. Since then, Allman said he has called the Governor's Office to relay the message that Mendocino County is in need and it has been skipped over in the past several state funding opportunities related to law enforcement upgrades.

In Gov. Jerry Brown's recommended budget for the 2016-17 fiscal year, there are additional funds for counties that didn't see funding last year. That means the Sheriff's Office likely won't have to reapply for funds, or challenge the past application, as long as the project has an emphasis on creating treatment and programming space rather than using funding to increase jail capacity. The new unconnected jail facility could still be a reality for the Sheriff's Office in the future.

Brown's budget proposal specifically includes \$250 million in general funds for competitive grants to counties that have previously received only a partial award, or have never received an award from the state for replacing or renovating county jails aimed at improving custodial housing, re-entry, rehabilitative programming, mental health services or treatment space.

Out of the state's 30 small counties, recognized as having a population of 200,000 or less, 13, including Mendocino County, have never received a related award, and one has only received a partial award, according to Brown's budget proposal.

### WHAT'S NEXT

An outline of proposed language to get a ballot measure for a new community mental health hospital is currently under review by attorneys, Allman said, but a group has already been assembled and met, with the next step of getting that language finalized as early as next week and then getting the petition to county staff for final review.

At least 2,500 citizen signatures are required to petition an item for the ballot. Allman said he is ready to start collecting signatures himself after the documentation is ready to move forward.

Even though he knows he could just ask the county Board of Supervisors to place the item on the ballot without collecting signatures, he said he wants all local citizens to know the problem.

"If I had one goal for 2016, it's that we as a county could resolve crisis care for our mentally ill," Allman said. "There are people in our county right now who are satisfied with Mental Health because they don't have to deal with it anymore, and I'm not one of them."



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