

# Mental health forum decries facility dearth

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HARLINGEN — Fifty-four state mental health beds for a region with more than 1 million people.

The statistic was repeated again and again Monday at a forum organized by the Texas Department of State Health Services to evaluate the current mental health crisis system and find ways to make it better.

Advocates of reform told a professional panel that there are not nearly enough beds in the Rio Grande Valley — one of the fastest-growing areas in the country.

"You are setting up the system to fail," state Rep. Veronica Gonzales, D-McAllen.

The lack of state in-patient treatment facilities is not fair to patients, their families, or the public, said judges, teachers, and doctors who testified to the group at Valley Baptist Medical Center's Woodward Conference Center.

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their families are getting "shafted" in the Valley, said Cameron County Judge Gilbert Hinojosa.

"It hasn't gotten any better in 20 years," he said.

When treatment isn't an option, some people with mental health problems wind up in county jails and become a burden to law enforcement. City police officers and sheriff's deputies often bear the responsibility of dealing with the mentally ill, Hinojosa said.

The Texas Health and Safety Code requires law enforcement agencies to transport mental health patients who have been committed to a mental health facility. If there are no beds available locally, that means the officers have to take the patients elsewhere.

At a cost of more than \$90,000 to taxpayers, the Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office transported 640 people suffering from mental illness to state and private mental hospitals during 2004, according to information obtained through a public information request to the Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office.

Deputies put in more than 3,500 hours transporting mental patients to facilities in Harlingen, San Antonio and even Austin when beds were not avail-

able locally.

Those are 3,500 hours not spent patrolling the county.

Taking officers off the streets is a huge public safety concern, Gonzales said.

The way transports are performed today is a raw deal for the deputies and the patients, Hinojosa said. Deputies are not mental health professionals and mental health patients are not criminals, he said.

City police departments and county sheriff's departments each say it is the other's responsibility to transport the patients and the Texas Health and Safety code is not clear whose responsibility it is to transport the patients.

Sometimes law enforcement refuses to transport a patient, some speakers said.

"Intergovernmental cooperation is often a challenge here," said Dr. Steven Shon with the Texas Department of State Health Services, who mediated the discussion between the speakers and the mental health crisis redesign committee.

One can't always throw money at a problem to solve it, Gonzales said. But money does help, and Texas must expand its mental health services.

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