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More secure beds needed for those with severe mental illness

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The Daytona Beach News-Journal should be commended for its editorial of Oct. 9, which called into question the proposed release of Linda Sue Anderson from Florida State Hospital at Chattahoochee to a local assisted living facility, or ALF. Anderson, suffering from severe mental illness, was committed to the state hospital just seven years ago following the shooting deaths of her two neighbors in Port Orange.

As a retired psychiatric nurse and long-time advocate for the mentally ill, I typically find myself on the other side of such issues. However, there are a small number of those afflicted with serious and persistent mental illness who are a danger to themselves or others — as this patient's mother and sister believe to be the case — who require long-term structured treatment in a secure setting. This patient also has a history of reported noncompliance with medications that assist in stabilizing her illness.

This is clearly not a patient who would do well in an ALF. Statistics quoted in the editorial reflect that in the last decade, 511 people who had been found not guilty due to mental illness were released from Florida State Hospital, that 15 were charged with new, violent crimes and that 135 were readmitted for a variety of reasons, including not meeting the conditions of their release.

During the nearly 60 years I have lived in Daytona Beach, I have seen our service continuum for the mentally ill come full circle. Many years ago, Halifax Health Medical Center was the only treatment option; Act (now Stewart-Marchman-Act) came several years later. As a member of Act's board for several years, I had the privilege of working with community leaders including David Hood (now a state representative) and Pat Patterson (now a member of the Volusia County Council) and many others. This area developed various levels of residential treatment group homes that could have been a possible resource for Ms. Anderson.

But over time, these valuable resources — which provided a place to live, supervision and treatment and, in one case, a secure treatment environment — have closed, one by one, all victims of a grossly underfunded community mental health budget.

According to a recent article by Skyler Swisher, Florida ranks 48th on its funding for the mentally ill. On average, the state spends \$39 per capita, compared to the national average of \$120.56.

The Halifax and Stewart-Marchman-Act crisis stabilization beds are full. Patients are being sent out of the county for treatment. Many patients are occupying beds at both facilities while awaiting beds that are also full at Northeast Florida State Hospital.

This is the outcome when funding for community-based services to meet the needs of the mentally ill is ignored. Outpatient services are very limited; the total absence of group homes and the lack of short-term residential treatment beds have all led to this dilemma.

One program, an intensive case-management/supervision program called Florida Assertive Community Treatment, or FACT, is the only real alternative we have. And, according to Chet Bell, the CEO of Stewart-Marchman-Act, the actual need is four times more than the current 100 slots available.

Perhaps it is time to review priorities in services, and fund services that could help prevent Ms. Anderson and others from being in danger of harming herself or others.

Holt, of Daytona Beach, was head nurse at the secure mental-health ward at Halifax Health Medical Center for 20 years, and since then has been an advocate for the mentally ill. She currently serves on the board of the Northeast Florida State Hospital and several community boards.

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