

Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

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For Immediate Release

Contact: Jeffrey Dismukes, Director
ODMHSAS Public Information
405-522-3908

ODMHSAS ANNOUNCES PLANS TO REVIEW AND ASSESS COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN TAHLEQUAH

The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services has announced that it is conducting a comprehensive review of its mental health services in Adair, Cherokee, Sequoyah and Wagoner counties.

Bill Willis Community Mental Health Center, a state-operated facility headquartered in Tahlequah, currently provides services to these areas. The department is considering cost-cutting measures to make the Center more efficient, in addition to comparing its operating costs to that of potential outside providers. Department leaders today met with staff to discuss their intentions and answer questions.

This action is in direct response to the state's ongoing fiscal crisis. The agency has approximately \$25 million less to work with this year than it did just over a year ago due to budget cuts, increased operational costs and unfunded mandates.

"Our cost to operate the Center is simply too high to sustain continued operation at the current level," said Carrie Slatton-Hodges, ODMHSAS deputy commissioner for mental health services. "We need to find a more efficient way to deliver those services through the facility that we currently operate or other means."

The department will review employee recommendations for ways to reduce operating costs while maintaining an appropriate level of services for the community. The agency will also solicit proposals from other certified community mental health centers interested in competing to see if they may be able to deliver services more cost effectively. A formal review of all materials will be used to arrive at a decision about future actions.

Slatton-Hodges says that the facility is in essence being asked to demonstrate how it can operate at a competitive level in the marketplace. If employee suggestions can be implemented and are as cost-effective as other proposals, then the state will continue direct operation of the facility.

ODMHSAS Commissioner, Terri White, has stressed that the agency's first priority is to make sure that Oklahomans have access to the services they need.

"In the end, we must ensure that we are doing the best that we can to effectively and efficiently manage state money," said White. "Our focus must be on the thousands of Oklahomans who are seeking help for their mental health and substance abuse issues, and who depend on us to help them recover from their illnesses and achieve wellness."

Department leaders say that their actions are not intended to cause alarm, and hope that employees and area residents will understand that their intent is simply to stretch limited state funds so that they can better serve the people of Oklahoma. It is not expected that there will be any disruption of services for individuals in the affected areas.

There are specific state laws and prescribed processes that must be followed when exploring the privatization of a state-operated facility. The department will follow all rules and regulations.

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