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Mentally ill are losing some of their last refuges



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By [Alan Johnson](#)

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

CHILLICOTHE, Ohio - A state budget cut forced one of Rob Stanley's group homes for the mentally ill into foreclosure - and pushed "Sheriff Bob" off the front porch where he had sat nearly every day for 15 years waving and smiling at passers-by on Paint Street.

Of all the groups affected by state budget rationing, the mentally ill may be hit the hardest.

"Thirty-six years I've worked in this business," said Terry Russell, head of the Ohio Adult Care Facilities Association. "Never, never did I think anything like this could happen. How can people sleep at night? We would never do this to Alzheimer's patients, but we're willing to put the mentally ill on the street."

The Ohio office of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio issued a news release last week pleading with state lawmakers

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not to make further cuts in funding for the mentally ill as they try to plug an \$851.5 million budget hole.

"NAMI members are not above begging, and we're begging," said James Mauro, executive director. "Please, whatever you decide to do to fix this budget hole, spare mental health."

Small group homes like Stanley's are one of the last refuges for mentally ill adults turned out of state hospitals. v Stanley had 10 residents in two group homes. When two moved out, he was unable to replace them because budget cuts froze funding for new residential state supplemental payments. As a result, he lost \$1,548 a month, couldn't pay his mortgage, and watched as the sheriff padlocked the front door on his home at 104 S. Paint St.

The residents, some of whom had lived there since the early 1990s, had to move elsewhere; two were able to move to Stanley's other home.

But Robert Chester, 88, affectionately known as "Sheriff" by fellow residents and people who recognized him from his regular spot on the front porch, had a particularly hard time adjusting.

"It was the most horrible thing I've every gone through in my life," Stanley said. "It was like losing your child."

Stanley fought to hold back tears when he said he feels he let the residents down. "This was their home. They were settled in."

Stanley said very few state officials in Columbus know the pain caused statewide by round after round of budget cuts. "I don't think they know what crisis really is."

The Ohio Department of Mental Health and the Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities are independently polling agencies to assess the human impact of cuts.

The association's preliminary report revealed serious repercussions: elimination of school-based prevention and counseling programs, cuts to suicide- and violence-prevention counseling, reduction in services for indigent males and non-Medicaid clients, and treatment waiting lists stretching to July 2010.

Mental-health "drop-in centers," where many people with mental illness spend their days, are closing or greatly reducing hours. Most programs providing help with housing, education and employment already have fallen by the wayside, officials said.

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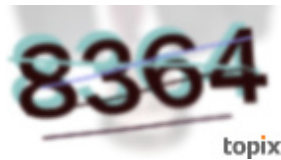
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