

House bill creates community system to help mentally ill citizens

By Guest Columnist Rep. Tom Miles, State Representative from House District #75



Special to Pelahatchie News

As of this writing, we are just finishing up our fourth week of the 2023 legislative session, and most of the work this past week has been done in the committee process.

I am proud to report that it looks like the Mississippi Legislature may actually be on a path to do away with one of the most outrageous practices we've had to endure in this state. Did you know that some individuals with mental illness and no means to pay for care have been kept in the county jail until a place opened for them in a State institution? Yes, that has been the fate of some of the most needy among us. The stats show that one in five U.S. adults experience mental illness each year.

We have taken up a couple of important bills in the Judiciary B Committee that address mental illness. I'm proud to be sponsoring both of these pieces of legislation, and they come from work that we have done by holding hearings this past fall. We are looking as a state for ways to best improve the mental health crisis. We've worked with and taken input from chancery clerks, sheriffs, judges, doctors, nurses, the Department of Mental Health, our community health centers and other

non-profits and mental health organizations across our state and country.

The first bill is House Bill 1222, which recently passed the Judiciary B Committee. The bill is known as The Mississippi Collaborative Response to Mental Health Act and proposes that a community support system be established to help these individuals and their families.

First, it will give much-needed resources to our law enforcement officers. Second, it requires that a commission be established to help manage these cases. And third, citizens will be evaluated by certified health personnel and, if needed, they will be transferred to a registered facility for help – not placed behind bars. Commission members must include a chancery clerk, whose office administers the civil aspect of the cases, and also a sheriff.

Why a sheriff? Because, oftentimes, law enforcement is called upon to subdue and take into custody an individual who is in the throes of a mental health crisis and who may be presenting a danger to themselves or others.

Most of us have heard of instances where an individual may have been having a mental breakdown, and untrained law enforcement would not recognize it and seriously harm a subject in an attempt to subdue them. In the past, it seemed more

expedient to just take the individual on to the jail for safekeeping, for an undetermined amount of time. Under House Bill 1222, that changes. Instead, law enforcement personnel must be trained and certified to render specialized treatment to a mentally ill subject.

I sincerely hope that when this session closes, House Bill 1222 becomes law in Mississippi. It is high time we treated our fellow citizens with respect and concern if they are suffering from mental illness. Jail doesn't fit that mold. This is a major reform that, if signed into law, it will help with mental health services in our state.

HB 534, which I presented in the Judiciary B Committee, is our second bill dealing with mental health reform. This bill deals with drug intervention courts and gives them the authority to include

mental health services. It also provides authority to the Administrative Office of Courts Intervention Advisory Committee to provide additional funding to courts where needed. This bill also adds fentanyl and drug abuse education to tobacco education.

It was a big week at the Capitol for first responders and law enforcement. We passed HB 521 out of the Insurance Committee to allow an annuity retirement plan for volunteer fire volunteers, if they meet certain requirements. We've also continued to work on the death benefit plan for law enforcement officers, firefighters and first responders, which will not only pay a death benefit in the line of duty, but will also pay if they were to pass away off duty, as well.

We've had visitors from all across the state – from sheriffs, supervisors, doctors, nurses, occupational therapists, members of the Mississippi Farm Bureau and so many others, all advocating their issues to make Mississippi a better place.

All bills have a committee deadline of January 31 to be out of committee, or they will die in the committee. We will begin debate on issues that make the committee deadline starting on February 1 on the House Floor.

Please feel free to reach out to me any time via Facebook, email at tmiles@house.Ms.gov or you can call my office at 601-469-7886.



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Representative Tom Miles said he was "privileged" to recently host four local students as House pages. Pictured (l to r) are Alex Bierman, Maddie Holmes, Representative Tom Miles, Addison Lindsey and Hannah Beatty.



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