

THE AUGUSTA CHRONICLE

Report: Deaths, lack of housing plague Georgia system for disabled, mentally ill

Tom Corwin

August 26, 2019

An independent reviewer found that despite Georgia's claims of compliance, a state health care system for the developmentally disabled and mentally ill is still inadequate.

Georgia claims it is in compliance with a settlement with the federal government to improve the care of those with developmental disabilities and mental illness, but an independent source found their death rate is climbing and that the state still failing to meet its responsibility to house thousands suffering from these disorders.

Earlier this year, the state twice asked the Justice Department to find it had complied with and should be released from a 2010 settlement over its treatment of the developmentally disabled and mentally ill in its care. But in her report to the U.S. District Court filed last week, independent reviewer Elizabeth Jones found a number of areas where the state was lacking and in fact doing worse than in previous years, particularly with the deaths of developmentally disabled patients in community care.

Earlier this year, the state twice asked the Justice Department to find it had complied with and should be released from a 2010 settlement over its treatment of the developmentally disabled and mentally ill in its care. But in her report to the U.S. District Court filed last week, independent reviewer Elizabeth Jones found a number of areas where the state was lacking and in fact doing worse than in previous years, particularly with the deaths of developmentally disabled patients in community care.

An Augusta Chronicle investigation in 2015 found nearly 1,000 deaths among those patients in community care in both 2013 and 2014, and the state has twice halted moving them from state hospitals into community care over the lack of adequate care among those providers. In its last Annual Mortality Review that covered fiscal year 2017, Jones noted that the death rate has continued to climb each year, from 12.5 per 1,000 in fiscal year 2015 to 16.4 per 1,000 in 2017.

"Perhaps most significantly," Jones notes, the death rate for those the state has already identified as high risk is anywhere from twice to four times as high.

“Unfortunately,” Jones wrote, “there are still preventable deaths occurring in the State’s system, often the product of substantiated neglect by community provider staff. These deaths reveal that the system is too often unable to meet the needs of people with high-risk conditions.” The state’s own internal death investigations “have found serious concerns with the State system’s ability to deliver adequate and appropriate services to people with” developmental disabilities, she concluded.

While noting the improvements the state has made in a number of areas, “there remain major gaps in processes, practices and oversight that continue to contribute to the potential for harm,” Jones wrote.

The state’s accomplishments with mental illness are also inadequate and overstated. While telling the federal government that it has provided supported housing for at least 4,400 through the Georgia Housing Voucher Program, Jones noted that this is a cumulative figure since 2010 and doesn’t reflect the number currently getting help.

There were actually 1,973 authorized to get help through the program in June, down 25% from the 2,628 who got help in January 2018, she wrote, which is still far less than what the state claimed.

Two of the mentally ill populations the state is tasked with helping are those who are chronically homeless and those patients who are released from prison or jail.

The state has estimated there are 1,658 to 1,853 mentally ill who are chronically homeless, but the independent reviewer said that from the information provided it could not tell how many had been assessed

mentally ill who are chronically homeless, but the independent reviewer said that from the information provided

it could not tell how many had been assessed for Georgia’s housing voucher program, and only 75 had been linked to services. Some could be getting help through federal housing programs, but “that information was not provided,” Jones wrote.

<p>Under Agreement</p> <p>In October 2010, the state of Georgia and the U.S. Department of Justice entered into a settlement agreement over the conditions in its state hospitals where the state agreed to stop admitting patients with developmental disabilities to state-run facilities and begin transitioning those patients to community-based care. It also agreed to begin providing support and housing in the community for those with severe and persistent mental illness, and to meet a number of milestones each year.</p> <p>An Independent Reviewer was appointed to monitor the state’s progress and report to the court each year. The milestones were to be reached by 2016 but the two parties signed an extension agreement that year to allow the state more time to reach its goals. Georgia claimed earlier this year that it had reached substantial compliance but the Independent Reviewer did not agree</p>

About a quarter of those in prison or in jail suffer from mental illness, Jones estimated, so thousands are released each year with a need for housing help. Of the 11,300 with mental illness released, 672 were assessed for help with the Georgia program and 491 were approved, but the state did not provide a number for how many were linked to services, Jones noted.

“Regrettably, the State’s performance in the (housing voucher) area appears to be slipping, rather than moving forward as expected,” she wrote. “This is a dispiriting finding.”