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OPINION

Friends in need

Our view • St. Louis picks up pieces of state psychiatric facilities closure.

Some of the worst casualties of the state of Missouri's relentless budget cutting in recent years were created by last year's decision to close the Metropolitan St. Louis Psychiatric Center and the Southeast Missouri Mental Health Center in Farmington.

To pare \$7 million from its \$23 billion budget, the state cut loose more than 4,000 Missourians with mental illness who had depended on the emergency rooms and 88 in-patient beds at these facilities. The curtain was brought down abruptly and amid great uncertainty over where this vulnerable population would go — or could be taken — in times of crisis.

The state unceremoniously dumped its responsibility onto local communities. Police, EMS workers, private hospitals and nonprofit service providers were left to scramble. To their credit, they rose to the challenge and made remarkable progress in picking up the pieces.

Last week, a coalition of behavioral health service providers, backed by the BJC HealthCare and SSM Health Care hospital systems, announced the formation of a new nonprofit called the St. Louis Regional Psychiatric Stabilization Center. The new entity is finalizing plans to reopen a 24-hour emergency room and a short-term 16-bed inpatient facility at the old St. Louis Metropolitan Psychiatric Center on Delmar Boulevard.

The Regional Health Coalition put up \$1.5 million in start-up capital. The state committed to paying half of what is expected to be \$2 million a year in unreimbursed operating expenses. BJC and SSM will cover the balance.

Since last July, police and EMS workers have begun taking patients in need of mental health care to hospital emergency departments. They proved ill-suited to provide the sort of care needed.

Busy emergency department personnel had no experience connecting uninsured mental

health patients to other essential services. The often-chaotic environments of hospital emergency rooms sometimes added to the stress of the mentally ill patients.

Barnes-Jewish and St. Mary's hospitals, because of their proximity to the largest concentration of people in need, bore the brunt of emergency room admissions. Emergency room staffs in these two facilities worked, often heroically, to accommodate these special patients along with the steady stream of trauma and medical emergencies.

Reopening a specialized psychiatric emergency room and small inpatient facility will help relieve some of the stress. But it won't end the problems of an ad hoc system struggling to fill the void left by the state.

The new facility will have capacity for only brief patient stays. Thus, keeping patients safe and stable will depend on seamlessly linking them to outpatient services.

St. Louis has an unusually dedicated and effective community of nonprofit agencies that serve mentally ill people. But the best and most experienced managers and caseworkers understand that there is much that can be done to improve coordination, communication and accountability.

These agencies, with help from the Regional Health Commission, have been busy rethinking how to better manage the area's behavioral health system. Their best ideas soon will be put to the test. That will take resources.

"Everybody is at the table with their checkbooks open," said June McCallister Fowler, vice president of corporate and public communications at BJC. "They will need to keep their checkbooks open."

That goes for political leaders in Jefferson City, too. They have a long way to go to make amends for having recklessly abandoned their responsibility to profoundly ill Missourians.