

# Travis Co. Jail becomes largest provider of mental health help after hospital overcrowding



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Published: February 8, 2017, 5:18 am Updated: February 8, 2017, 8:55 am



AUSTIN (KXAN) — Lawmakers this Legislative Session are proposing to spend \$1 billion to fix state hospitals in order to treat more people suffering from mental illness.

This fix could wind up having a big impact on those waiting in jail for a hospital bed and tax dollars. On Wednesday, hundreds are expected at the State Capitol to rally for this proposed funding within Senate Bill One.

“I think it’s important to remember that folks in jail waiting for a bed have not been convicted of a crime,” says Gyl Switzer, Public Policy Dir. Mental Health America Texas. “But that’s not okay for folks to be housed in a jail while they wait for a state hospital bed we need some rethinking.”

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Like many of the state hospitals in Texas, the Austin State Hospital is more than 150 years old. It has just shy of 300 beds and at any time is full. Because of that the Travis County Jail had to find ways to treat those suffering from mental illness. The Travis County Sheriff's Department told county commissioners in 2016 that over a 10 year span the number of people being treated for mental health concerns has gone up from 250 to 650 people per month.

The rise in mental health patients has led the Travis County Jail to set aside more beds for mental health services than the state hospital in Austin – leading the jail to become the largest provider of mental health services in the county. SB1 proposes to pump \$1 billion into fixing up state hospitals to alleviate this overcrowding and save on taxpayer dollars.

“This is something that would be used to look at the infrastructure of our state hospital system, perhaps even replace some of our hospitals, some of which have been around 150 years and are crumbling and not meeting federal standards and don't have beds available,” says Greg Hansch, Public Policy Dir., National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Mental health advocates say this funding would be incredibly positive for the state hospital system but they are concerned that other issues like CPS, education, and border security may lessen the proposed funding.

“There's a lot left to be figured out concerning where do we come up with that \$1 billion, does it come from general revenue, does it come through bonding authority? There's a lot of uncertainty at this point that's just the number that's been targeted for this legislative session,” says Hansch.

Hundreds of advocates will be rallying on the south steps at 12:30 p.m. Wednesday and will then meet with lawmakers. They will also show their support for a House bill that's proposing about \$162 million in funding for things like prevention and intervention programs.