A patient at Terrell State Hospital walked past a porch crowded with patient beds in 1967 — a time when state-run hospitals were shrinking nationwide. More than 50 years later, Texas is unable to keep up with the demand for psychiatric hospital beds.

For victims, too much to bear

Freeze was deadly for those already facing challenges

By Zach Despart and Alejandro Serrano

Gilbert Rivera was proud to live on his own. Sixty years old and mentally challenged, he enjoyed hanging out to his boombox and walking with family on the phone.

When his brother Israel Bura called on the afternoon of Feb. 21, Houston’s coldest day in three decades, Rivera told him he had lost power and heat at his apartment near Hobby Air- port but was OK. Then his cellphone died, leaving his brother unable to check in that evening, when tem- peratures dropped into the teens. The winds were too icy for Bura to travel the 25 miles to his brother’s apartment until Tuesday afternoon. When he ar- rived, he found his brother dead on the floor of his bedroom, bundled in his warmest clothes. The

Deaths continue on A6

Abbott disputes oversight hurt by appointees’ cuts

By Emily Deachman and Jay Root

A decade ago, after an Arctic cold spell knocked out power and left millions of Texans freezing in the dark, the Public Utility Commission’s enforcemen- t arm appeared moving in to action. They sued pen- nies for the companies that had promised but failed to de- liver electricity in an emer- gency.

Safeguards put in place after the extreme weather. Two weeks ago, utility companies were forced to declare a major emergency for the first time after a cold front dropped temperatures into the teens. More recently, it had added-

ed lawyers whose only job was to pursue wrongdo- ing. The energy companies eventually paid fines and settlements totaling hun- dreds of thousands of dol- lars for failing to prepare for the extreme weather.

Abbott continues on A6
A patient makes a bed at Rush State Hospital at Kingwood. On Jan. 12, 2021, another patient, Don Wallace, was assaulted and later died from his injuries.

### About this series

This story is one of a series by the Houston Chronicle's Investigative Team. Before the story was published on Jan. 21, 2021, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission received an email from an unnamed official regarding the investigation of one of its employees. The employee had been involved in the investigation of the death of Don Wallace, a patient at Rush State Hospital in Kingwood. The email contained information about the investigation and raised concerns about the employee's involvement. The employee was subsequently suspended from their position and an internal review was conducted. The investigation did not reveal any wrongdoing on the part of the employee.

### By the numbers

- **840,000**: Number of people lacking mental health treatment in Texas
- **3.3 million**: Number of adults in Texas who have a serious mental illness
- **40,000**: Number of Texas residents confined in mental hospitals
- **60,000**: Number of people in Texas living on the streets with a mental illness
- **$2 billion**: Cost of the state's mental health system
- **38,000**: Number of people in Texas in jail for mental illness
- **2,000**: Number of beds in state mental hospitals
- **100,000**: Number of people on the mental health waitlist
- **100,000**: Number of people waiting for state mental health services
- **$430 million**: Cost of the state's mental health system
- **39,000**: Number of people in Texas living on the streets with a mental illness
- **12,000**: Number of people living on the streets with a mental illness

## In Crisis

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission is under fire for its handling of the mental health crisis in the state. The commission has been criticized for its lack of accountability and transparency in addressing the crisis. The organization has been described as secretive and unresponsive to the needs of people with mental illness. The state's mental health system is struggling to meet the needs of people with mental illness, and the system is in crisis.

Don Wallace, a patient at Rush State Hospital in Kingwood, was assaulted and later died from his injuries. The investigation revealed that the patient had been subjected to seclusion and restraints, and that there were systemic issues within the hospital's mental health services. The investigation is ongoing, and the results will be released in the near future.

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**Neglect**

By Alex Stuckey

January 21, 2021

One more week. Suddenly, the phone rang.

"There was an assault in the patient unit," said a nurse, a message relayed from Rush State Hospital.

As Don died, his doctors repeatedly asked state and hospital officials what had happened to him. During the assault, someone knocked on the door of his room, according to witnesses, and the door was not opened.

Don was 34 years old, and he had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. He was confined at Rush State Hospital since 2006, according to his family. The hospital is part of a system that has seen significant cuts in state funding and insufficient oversight.

In recent years, Texas' mental health system has struggled to meet the needs of people with mental illness. The state has seen a shortage of mental health workers, and some hospitals have been forced to reduce staffing levels.

While the state has tried to improve its mental health system in recent years, it has struggled to meet the needs of people with mental illness. The system is in crisis, and the state has been criticized for its lack of accountability and transparency in addressing the crisis.

### Mental health crisis

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While the state has tried to improve its mental health system in recent years, it has struggled to meet the needs of people with mental illness. The system is in crisis, and the state has been criticized for its lack of accountability and transparency in addressing the crisis. The organization has been described as secretive and unresponsive to the needs of people with mental illness. The state's mental health system is struggling to meet the needs of people with mental illness, and the system is in crisis.
Don Wallace was a healthy and happy child and teenager with no hint of mental illness, said his father, a clinical psychologist.

The state's refusal to provide answers in Don's death has denied closure for his sister, Kathy Preg, and father, Don Wallace.

This is a timeline of key events:

- **1990s** - She had stayed close to her son, who was hospitalized 13 times.
- **2004** - He worked at a residential treatment center and was occasionally violent.
- **2006** - Texas created a waitlist for incarcerated defendants waiting for a bed.
- **2014** - He had a 2014 on a felony charge after being arrested for assault.
- **2015** - Mathis was reported to the county's mental health services.
- **2016** - The incident paints a different picture.
- **2017** - They played board games.
- **2018** - He had a conversation with Mathis.
- **2019** - The incident occurred.
- **2020** - She wrote a letter to the Texas Department of State Health Services.
- **2021** - She tried to deliver the letter.
- **2022** - The family sought transparency in the care system.

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**In Crisis**

Don's parents stood in the middle of a Texas Courtroom on Aug. 14, 2014, trying to understand their son's death and the system that led to it.

Judge Jay Burnett had just ordered Don, 55, be transferred to a state psychiatric hospital for 120 days to re- strive his competency and ability to stand trial.

Burnett's parents were offered to pay for the window. They tried to explain to the court that Don was of sound mind and actions.

Don had already been hospitalized 13 times. He would never regain competency.

The judge disagreed. He ordered Don to be held for three hours from the hospital.

Don's father was worried. He'd recently visited the state mental hospital when his patients were sent there. He didn't want to see his son there again.

They hoped to have Don transferred to a private facility.

Don's family asked the judge to transfer their son to a less-restrictive environment.

**The state's refusal to provide answers in Don's death has denied closure for his sister, Kathy Preg, and father, Don Wallace.**

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**A growing wait**

For people charged with a mental illness and sent to hospitals because they don't pose a threat to themselves or others, there isn't supposed to be a limit on the amount of time they can be kept.

The Chronicle analyzed records from one such hospital, the Forensic Clearinghouse List.

In 2006, Texas created a waitlist for incarcerated defendants waiting for a bed. That year, 239 people were listed. In 2014, 722 people were listed.

Advocates say states should have 50 public psychiatric hospital beds per 100,000 people.

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**Don Wallace was a healthy and happy child and teenager with no hint of mental illness, said his father, a clinical psychologist.**

Don Wallace was not manifestly dangerous to himself or others. He was found incompetent to stand trial.

The panel decided that he was not guilty by reason of insanity. He was placed in a state psychiatric hospital for compulsory treatment.

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**Conclusion**

The Cherokee County district attorney at the time, Rachel Futen, was not in the Texas Attorney General's Office and could not comment on the matter.

The attorney general's office did not respond to inquiries. The Office of the State Auditor did not respond to inquiries.

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**Note**

This story is published in collaboration with the News-Leader, EJN's 2022 Media Fellowship program.

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**About The Chronicle**

The Chronicle is a nonprofit media organization focused on covering issues related to mental health care in Texas.

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**About EJN**

EJN is a nonprofit media group that provides journalists with the training, tools and connections they need to advance coverage of important issues.

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