

# Commissioners debate creation of mental health board

BY PAT MURPHY  
STAFF WRITER

As Oakland County commissioners wrap up 1996, a new controversy looms on the horizon: An independent authority to oversee the delivery of community mental health services.

The authority — its formation and responsibilities — has been a back-burner issue for some time. Despite three public hearings, debate on the Community Mental Health Authority has been relatively quiet.

That started to change Thursday at the regular meeting of the Oakland County Board of Commissioners. Hope Cummins, the Farmington Hills resident who is president of the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, used the public comment portion of the agenda to denounce efforts to establish the authority.

An authority to oversee community mental health would

inevitably lead to a lack of accountability, Cummins said. Instead of being the responsibility of commissioners — who answer directly to voters — administering the county's \$100 million mental health budget would fall to an autonomous bureaucracy.

That's pretty strong language from the spokesperson for what is arguably the county's most influential mental health organization. It points to heated debate before the issue is resolved.

Members of any authority would be appointed by commissioners. But once appointed, they would be an entity unto themselves. The authority would set policy and oversee administration of mental health services with commissioners exerting indirect control.

There are several advantages to having an authority. Its members could focus on mental health issues, for example,

rather than having a wide range of concerns as commissioners have now. Furthermore, an authority could move more quickly on matters such as purchasing property for group homes.

One very big advantage, according to proponents, is that county government would be insulated — from a liability standpoint — from legal suits. The authority, not the county board, would be more liable for any legal problems.

Cummins isn't the only person concerned that any layer between the authority and county commissioners would result in a lack of accountability.

"Commissioners are elected by the people," said commissioner Dan Devine Jr., R-Bloomfield Hills. "We're the ones who are supposed to be held accountable

for the delivery of mental health services."

Devine is possibly the leading Republican opponent to any new authority. He is concerned any new mental health authority would be similar to the Road Commission for Oakland County.

County commissioners appoint members of the road commission, Devine said. After that, commissioners have very little input, he said.

"I can't get a pothole fixed," Devine said. "That's frustrating for commissioners, and that's frustrating for voters. When they get upset with the roads, they call us (commissioners). But it doesn't do any good."

"I don't want the same thing when it comes to mental health," Devine said.

Commissioner Lawrence R.

Pernick, D-Southfield, is also concerned about blurring the lines of responsibility and authority. "People still hold commissioners responsible for roads," said Pernick, one of those who wants the county board more directly involved in roads.

Even though he'd reject a mental health authority if the vote was held today, Pernick said he's willing to listen to logic.

"There are just too many unanswered questions at this

time," he said. "Right now, however, we don't have enough reliable information, and we have too many concerns."

Discussion on the authority is expected to intensify when the Public Services Committee takes up the issue prior to Dec. 12, the last regular meeting of the county board.

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