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Oakland takes on mental health

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Don't look for radical changes now that Oakland officials, rather than state officials, are in charge of the county's mental health dollars, according to county commissioner Marilyn E. Gosling, R-Bloomfield Hills.

At least not immediately, Gosling said Friday after she and her colleagues on the Oakland County Board of Commissioners ended two years of negotiation and adopted the so-called "full management" of Oakland's mental health resources.

At an emotional meeting Thursday, the county board also appointed Richard Herrie of Franklin, Judith Summers of Royal Oak and commissioner Shelley Goodman Taub of Bloomfield Hills to vacancies on the Community Health Board.

They were selected over Calvin Lippitt, a Southfield resident who is president of the Oakland County chapter of the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Probate Court Judge Sandra G. Silver and Marcella Montante of West Bloomfield.

Increased role

Their role in allocating mental

COUNTY BOARD

health services is greatly increased because under full management, the mental health board will oversee the budget that will more than double from about \$35 million annually to about \$96 million.

But it's not a significant increase, Gosling emphasized. Oakland would possibly have received that money anyway. The only difference is the mental health board will now call the shots on how it is spent.

"There's no new money available," Gosling said. So the issue boils down to how the mental health board allocates those resources.

It will take a year or longer to determine whether Oakland made a good decision by opting for full management, said Gosling, a member of the community mental health board who has been involved in those issues for more than a decade.

There will be one immediate change, however, she said. "It's going to be a lot tougher to be on

the board. There will be increased pressure about how we spend our money."

Pressure's on

Commissioners got a little taste of that pressure Thursday, when dozens of residents jammed the auditorium. Some passionately favored full management. Others — like Thomas Brown, president of the Michigan Association of Mental Health Professionals — were equally passionate in opposition.

"I think full management was the only way to go," said commissioner Thomas A. Law, R-West Bloomfield. "I was leery at first, because I'm worried about continued state funding."

"But after you consider all the alternatives, full management makes sense."

Law and others are convinced local officials — the mental health board — will be able to make the dollars available go further.

While he didn't criticize state officials, Law said he is convinced the mental health board will be able to cut or trim programs that are wasteful or inefficient, thus

making more money available for those that help people.

"We may have to privatize some programs," Law said. "We may have to eliminate others entirely. But I'm sure we locally can do a better job of allocating resources, as long as state funding remains at present levels."

One reason full management was not adopted earlier is a fear that state officials will reduce or cut back on funding.

That fear is addressed in the new full management contract by a clause that guarantees it remains at or near current levels. But that fear lingers, even though more than 50 counties have opted for full management.

"I always worry about the state," said commissioner Donn L. Wolf, R-Farmington Hills, one of three who voted against opting for full management.

The Legislature, which approves mental health allocations, may be sincere and well-intentioned, he said. But there's always a danger lawmakers may reduce state funding, leaving county officials with the choice of cutting services or increasing local taxes to make up the shortfall.

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Wednesday, June 2, Southfield: Spec's Howard School of Broadcasting, 16900 W. Eight Mile Road #115. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sara Oberg, 334-3876.

Wednesday, June 2, Troy: Troy Community Center, 500 W. Big Beaver, 3-9 p.m. Beverly Wiles, 689-2339.

Wednesday, June 2, Troy: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 3830 Crooks Road. 2-

8 p.m. Talitha Pennington, 566-8029.

Thursday, June 3, Troy: Martell Elementary School, 6666 Livonia, 2-8 p.m. Gail Seaman, 828-4285.

Saturday, June 5, Troy: Troy

Faith Lutheran Church, 37635 Dequindre, 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Juergen Ruf, 739-3227.

Wednesday, June 9, Southfield: DMR Financial Services, 24445 Northwestern. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sara Oberg, 334-3876.

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