

State Hospital

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Photo: TOM REEL, STAFF / SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

A parade of neatly trimmed trees lines the entrance to the San Antonio State Hospital, where patients chat at picnic tables as employees and visitors stroll across neatly trimmed lawns.

From the outside, the campus doesn't look distressed. But closer inspection shows that the west-end buildings, built between 1892 and 1946, have sloping floors, straining support beams and sinking foundations.

According to an independent architectural analysis ordered by the 2014 Legislature, 80 percent of the hospital's structures are in "critical condition."

The report, by architectural and engineering firm CannonDesign, recommended that every building at the hospital be demolished. It would cost taxpayers more to maintain the property than the one-time replacement price tag, estimated to be between \$175 million and \$190 million, the study found.

"Every (legislative) session it's come up: do we replace it? Do we rebuild it?" said state Sen. Carlos Uresti, D-San Antonio, in whose district the hospital lies. "The bottom line is, it's way overdue."

The San Antonio State Hospital is home has 302 beds for people with serious mental illness who are receiving intense treatment, rehabilitation and other services. Of the 302 beds, 109 are assigned to forensic patients; that is, people who are being held involuntarily, by court order, either because they are temporarily incompetent to stand trial or have been found not guilty of a crime by reason of insanity. The average length of stay is 32 days, although some patients have been at the facility for several years.

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Ligon has since been transferred to the maximum security psychiatric hospital in Vernon in North Texas.

Problems remain at the San Antonio State Hospital, where officials acknowledge the layout and building conditions are not ideal.

The decision on whether to demolish and replace the existing structures is in the hands of the Texas Legislature in conjunction with the Texas Department of State Health Services' Mental Health and Substance Abuse Division that oversees the state hospitals. Funding for new buildings depends on state lawmakers.

Uresti describes it as “a facility like you would see in a movie.”

Worn brick buildings house narrow hallways with low ceilings that wind into rooms pitched back to the 1960s — in one lobby, retro orange and blue armchairs face a mounted TV set fit for a Richard Nixon press conference.

It's not just an aesthetic drag: according to the report, the campus' layout is “poorly suited to support contemporary care.”

A vegetable and dairy farm used to take up most of the hospital's 250 acres that now lay empty, making traveling between buildings a burden.

The canteen, where residents go to socialize and eat, is on the opposite side of a majority of the adult dormitories. If patients without special privileges need to get there, they have to take a shuttle, or get an employee escort and walk almost a mile in the 100-degree heat.

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Legislators know the hospital and its layout are decrepit, but structural issues only color the background of a litany of problems at state-run mental health facilities. Long wait times, limited space and workforce shortages have plagued the system for years.

Over the summer, the Disability Rights Texas organization filed its second lawsuit against the hospital, claiming that patients waiting for extended periods of time to get a bed at the hospital were being denied due process.

In an attempt to stop the bleeding, legislators sought to focus attention — and money — on mental health care last session, officials said.

State hospitals received more than \$24 million for repairs, bonds and renovations. In the current 2016-17 budget, \$3.6 billion was appropriated for behavioral health and substance abuse services, an increase of more than \$150 million over the previous year. Of that, \$40 million went to state mental health hospitals, but it wasn't clear how much went to the San Antonio facility.

Work has already begun on the budget for the next biennium — the 85th Texas Legislature convenes Jan. 10 — and mental health advocates as well as health department officials hope the money continues to flow toward behavioral health.

"I think we're at the early stages of what could be some very transformative and impactful positive changes," said state Rep. Four Price, R-Amarillo, chairman of the Texas House Mental Health Committee.

The question is in what direction that change will take the hospital system.

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rapidly,” Price said. “I would not be surprised if we moved more toward a model where there were hospitals that were devoted (just) to forensic patients.”

Gilbert Gonzales, director of the Bexar County Mental Health Department, said if the state hospital became one of those fully forensic facilities, it would be a “disaster for the community.”

“The treatment that one gets at the state hospital seems to be the most intensive kind for the longest period of time,” Gonzalez said. “When you have a reduction of any kind to prevent that treatment ... emergency rooms, psychiatric hospitals, the center for health care services ... all get overcrowded.”

Nearly 70,000 adults receive community mental health services in Texas every month, and just over 2,300 Texans reside in state mental health beds on any given day, according to a [legislative report](#).

After the most recent lawsuit from Disability Rights Texas, the director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Liza Jensen, said she was concerned that the lawsuit would push the state to again reduce its civil beds.

“I think DSHS is probably going to convert all the civil beds into forensic unless somebody in South Texas sues them,” Jensen said. “If you’ve got one piece of the pie and you keep taking away a slice, taking away a slice, without increasing the pie eventually there’s going to be nothing left.”

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