



OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

Jim Hood, *Attorney General*
State of Mississippi

Post Office Box 220
Jackson, Mississippi 39205-0220
Telephone: (601) 359-3680
Fax: (601) 359-2009
www.agjimhood.com

NEWS RELEASE

August 11, 2016
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Rachael Ring
Public Information Officer
(601) 359-3279
rring@ago.state.ms.us

Attorney General Jim Hood Calls for Collaborative Effort in Continuing to Improve State Mental Health Services

JACKSON— A lawsuit filed today by the U.S. Department of Justice against the state of Mississippi provides the most meaningful opportunity yet for leaders to work together to continue to improve the state's mental health system, Attorney General Jim Hood said today.

The federal government alleges that the state has violated the Americans with Disabilities Act by housing mentally ill individuals in institutions rather than community settings. The Department of Justice has filed similar lawsuits in about a dozen states alleging violations of the U.S. Supreme Court's Olmstead decision.

"This lawsuit is a clarion call to all of us in state leadership to consider how we care for the least among us and how we can make it better," Attorney General Hood said. "I see this litigation as a challenge to our Legislature to find the resources we need to continue to expand mental health services. This is a clear opportunity for our Legislature, mental health professionals, our faith-based community and all of us as Mississippians to come together to determine an effective way to address issues related to our mental health delivery system for years to come. It's our obligation as Christians and people of faith to take care of those who are unable to take care of themselves. It's time for each of us to move forward to better fulfill that fundamental responsibility.

"The state has made great progress in expanding community mental health programs, and we will continue to push for expansion. We have come a long way, but further work remains to be done."

Attorney General Hood said his office has been negotiating with DOJ for several years in an effort to avoid litigation, which is expected to be a considerable cost to the state at a time when tax cuts have caused significant budget problems. However, the Attorney General refused to accept the federal government's demands for a court-ordered consent decree that would bind the state to perpetual federal oversight.

Attorney General Hood had also hoped that good-faith efforts to address the state's mental health needs might allay the federal government's concerns. Thus, the Attorney General has encouraged lawmakers for years to allocate additional resources to the Department of Mental Health. The Legislature did provide some extra funding in previous sessions, but this year actually cut the Department's budget by \$8.3 million. Since 2008, the Department has been forced to eliminate approximately 500 mental health beds, in addition to 34 beds in 2016 because of the Legislature's budget cuts and its refusal to provide additional money for mental health programs.

"Not only did the Department of Mental Health take a substantial budget hit, the Legislature did not agree to a request for more than \$12 million for community mental health programs," Attorney General Hood said. "That would have helped us continue our expansion of community-based mental health services and kept us moving in the right direction, as we've consistently been doing already."

The Attorney General noted that Georgia has been involved in similar litigation with DOJ since 2010 and has already spent more than \$200 million.

"Until this year, we have been effective in preventing a lawsuit and saving the state millions of dollars in anticipated expenses and attorneys' fees," Attorney General Hood said. "Unfortunately, the Legislature this year chose to put money toward big corporate tax cuts rather than meet the needs of those among us who most need our assistance. We are now in the undesirable position of fighting a lawsuit that will cost us even more. It's time to act on behalf of our mentally ill residents and invest in the care they deserve."

###