Murphy: Don't outsource state's mental health care | Opinion

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Those in law enforcement who understand the relationship between health and safety can clearly recognize that the potential for over 320,000 Michigan residents to lose access to their mental health care is dangerous.

Nevertheless, the Legislature is considering bills that would privatize our state’s strong public mental health system. In doing so, policymakers are tempting a scenario in which thousands of Michigan residents could lose access to the high-quality, cost-effective and affordable mental health care they need.

As a sheriff, I know there is absolutely no question that our communities are safer when each of us is healthy, supported and cared for. Amid a national mental health crisis exacerbated by the pandemic, these bills, SB 597 and SB 598, reflect a perilous misunderstanding of how to best support those living with mental illness.

While the benefits these bills will bring to Michigan taxpayers are uncertain at best, the threat they pose to our communities is crystal clear.

These bills could jeopardize access to vital care for those who need it for the sake of private shareholders who may never step foot in the state of Michigan. They would hand over the existing system to inexperienced, high-cost, for-profit, private companies.

These bills are wholeheartedly opposed by the Michigan Sheriffs’ Association, among others who recognize that “the private sector can be a partner in this endeavor,” but it “cannot be the owner” without destroying the community partnerships created by the public sector.
Currently, the network of Clubhouses across Michigan, each of which employs the clubhouse model of care pioneered by Fountain House, serves thousands of people living with serious mental illness in 30 different counties. These bills would devastate clubhouses' ability to serve each of those people, endangering the care, stability and necessary sense of community for those who need it most.

But the harm caused by these bills may go far beyond mental health services, impacting Medicaid services across the board. They would effectively eliminate local accountability and oversight of health services that over 2 million Michigan residents rely on. The ripple effect from these bills could touch every facet of our community and should raise alarm among us all, regardless of whether we currently live with mental illness or personally rely on Medicaid services.

Shifting to higher-cost, less efficient, for-profit administration of this system could cause Michigan to lose its single point of access for people in need, and for law enforcement responding to mental health crisis situations. Further, these bills could cause Michigan residents to lose the safety net for people who have inadequate private insurance coverage.

Each person in our state who lives with mental illness deserves to continue receiving the exceptional care they've come to rely upon. But, under these bills, accessing and affording that care could become more difficult, if not impossible, for those most in need.

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