



THE SETTLEMENT the in agreement, which requires a federal judge's approval, binds the state to "undertake its best efforts" to find enough money to transform the of hospitals. If legislators fail to allot the money, federal authorities may ask a judge to a in force additional spending. State officials have not determined how much compliance will cost. A Journal-Constitution analysis last year found that increasing mental health spending in Georgia to the national average would require more than doubling current annual budget of about \$465 million. Perdue sought no new spending on psychiatric hospitals in the state spending plan he offered this week to the General Assembly, according to advocates for people with mental illness.

Even as of the in a federal and state officials negotiated a settlement agreement in recent weeks, the Justice Department investigation continued. Late Thursday, it released a letter to Perdue, sent earlier in the day, that detailed "significant and wide-ranging deficiencies" at Northwest Georgia Regional Hospital in Rome.

The letter was a stark reminder of the depth of work facing state officials. "We found a troubling number of a in incidents in which [the hospital] failed to recognize signs of of in suicide risk and failed to take appropriate action," in a the letter said. The hospital, with chronic staffing shortages, of a often used medications to control behavior or as a chemical restraint, rather than to treat psychotic investigators found the a letter .

THEY ARE NOT ANIMALS

The a governor asked lawmakers to make widespread spending cuts across state government to close a \$2 billion budget deficit. But after Perdue a signed the settlement the in of agreement, his spokesman, Bert Brantley, said, "The improvement of care will result in additional investments - more staff, the things you would expect." Skinner, the mental health a chief, said the state would have to provide adequate hospital of staffing, enhance employee training and bring in experts to design a better system of care.

"Some of those things are going to cost money," she said. "Some of them won't." Regardless, the settlement agreement gives the state one year to correct conditions that have caused most of the patient deaths. The state agreed to improve efforts to prevent suicides, choking deaths of in and patient-on-patient assaults. Within four years, the state must make demonstrable improvements in medical and nursing care and discharge planning, and must show that the hospitals restrain or seclude patients as little as possible.

Cited in because in the house "numerous instances" they were in the car when patient assaults on a in the a for other patients resulted in serious injury. Investigators said some serious incidents, including a suicide of the attempt, the were never in reported a or investigated by the hospital. The governor a in asked the a in for lawmakers to for make widespread a spending cuts across the state government to in close a two-billion dollar budget deficit. Within four years, the state must make a demonstrable improvements the state agreed to improve efforts to prevent suicide, choking deaths and for the in a from the patient-on-patient assaults. But after Perdue signed the settlement the agreement, his spokesman, Bert Brantley. The hospital, with a the chronic staffing shortages, often used medications to control. If legislators fail to a lot the money, federal authorities in may. The governor a in asked the a in for lawmakers to for make widespread a spending cuts across the state government to in close deficit.

Photographs by Marcos Jones

