Mental Health Center Here
Threatened By Funds Slash

When President Nixon slashes budgets right and left in an unprecedented economy move, the electorate applauds and agrees that it's about time that the fat is sliced in Washington and the poor taxpayer given a break. But when the ax falls close at home, it behooves the concerned citizen to take a closer look at the Chief Executive's "economy move" to see if the money saved justifies the gutting of projects that are crucial to the health and welfare of the community and whether, in fact, it will be far dearer to restore those projects to their original form and if, indeed, such irreparable damage will have been done as to make it impossible to begin anew what took so long to start and eventually achieve.

We refer specifically to the $500,000 grant that was cancelled by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare at the direction of the national administration and which directly affects the lives of thousands of people in an eight-parish area of Acadiana. The money had been earmarked for the Acadiana Mental Health Center, which has been extraordinarily successful in helping the emotionally ill, the drug abusers, and the alcoholic of Acadiana. These deviations from a healthy norm are not peculiar to Southwest Louisiana. We have no more and no less of these unfortunate cases than any other community of comparable size. But they are here, and the Center over the years has forthrightly tackled the problems arising from their plight. Considering the handicaps they have had to work under, it is to the credit of the administrators and staff of the Center that they have been able to achieve so much.

Over the years the Center has treated its patients on an out-patient basis. A person with mental and emotional problems, a youth caught in a dangerous web of drug abuse, a breadwinner with what is euphemistically called a "drinking problem" — all these have received professional, personal attention at the Center and, in many cases, been able to continue their work or studies and live at home while fighting the illness that bedevils them. Just as often, there have been times when these patients have required hospitalization. When this happens the patient must be made to utilize the facilities at Charity Hospital and, what is sad and dreary to them and their loved ones, sent to Pineville.

The money that had been allocated by Congress but which has not been taken away would have prevented this. Mental patients would have been evaluated and hospitalized in Lafayette in the old Charity Hospital TB Annex. The annex is undergoing renovation and will be ready for occupancy during the summer by the Center. The lack of funding, however, means that there will be no staff for such an in-patient unit. It's costing about $1,000,000 to renovate the old annex. With the doubling of the present staff at the Center, the annex would have been able to handle treatment in quite excellent fashion in its new quarters. The administrators had one entire wing ready for operation, with beds, medical supplies and furnishings. All that was missing was an adequate number of staff personnel but now that has gone by the board.

The slashing of funds does not mean that the Acadiana Mental Health Center will close up shop. It will continue its present outpatient services to Acadiana, along with Outreach Clinics in Abbeville, New Iberia and Opelousas. In fact, it had planned — and will follow through — to start new Outreach Clinics in Breaux Bridge and St. Martinville. It will continue to provide psychiatric and psychological evaluation to the courts and other governmental and community agencies.

But with the continued growth of Acadiana, there will be more demand made upon the Center to treat additional patients. The Center is already operating at full capacity and with the curtailment of funds that it must now labor under, it is obvious that the quality of its services must necessarily be diluted. Such action can only result in distress to the many families who have depended upon the Center for assistance.

We believe that it would be feathers in their new congressional hats if Sen. J. Bennett Johnston and Rep. John Breaux would plead the case for the Acadiana Mental Health Treatment Center and make the administration and HEW see the light. We're not concerned with the operation of a new building in Lafayette. We worry, and we believe that our congressional elected officials should also worry, about what will happen to the mentally ill, the drug victims, and the victims of alcohol if the help they need is not forthcoming.

Is "budget slashing" worth the price we might have to pay in suicides, broken families, and physically wrecked lives?