

Murphy, Colleagues Introduce Bill to Expand Access to Mental Healthcare

Today, Congressman Chris Murphy (CT-5) and a bipartisan group of 254 of his colleagues introduced landmark legislation to eliminate disparities in health coverage for mental healthcare. The State of Connecticut has been a leader on this issue; since 1999, it has had one of the strongest laws in the country, bringing coverage for mental health to the same level as other medical needs. However, this pressing issue must be addressed nationwide, as more than 57 million Americans suffer from mental illness and 26 million are afflicted with chemical addiction.

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"Increasing access to mental health services has long been a passion for me. This bill is another important step in removing the stigma associated with mental illness. I am proud to be an original cosponsor," said Murphy.

Last year alone, addiction and untreated mental illness drained over \$550 billion from our economy in lost wages, productivity, and revenues. Private health insurers have consistently fought to exempt themselves from the need to offer mental health coverage, arguing that the costs would be too high. However, studies of plans that provide full coverage for mental health and chemical dependency treatment have found that when mental health and addiction benefits were equalized, there was "little or no significant adverse impact on access, spending, or quality."

"This gap in coverage is not only unfair to those afflicted with mental illness or addiction; it is putting a strain on our healthcare system and our economy. I am proud that Connecticut has been a leader on this issue, and this federal legislation is a good first step toward bringing the rest of the country up to our standard. We have to act on behalf of those suffering from mental illness or chemical dependence, and businesses large and small that provide healthcare coverage," said Murphy.

The bill, named the "Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act" after the former Senator who championed this cause before his death, will eliminate disparities in health coverage, while at the same time providing safeguards for employers.

This legislation ensures mental health and addiction benefits are no more restrictive or costly than the financial requirements or treatment limitations applied to medical and surgical benefits. The bill also guarantees that plans cover the same range of mental illnesses and addiction disorders offered by the federal employee health plan that Members of Congress use. Finally, it excludes from coverage requirements businesses of less than 50 employees and those that experience an overall premium increase of 2 percent or more in the first year and 1 percent in subsequent years.

Similar legislation gained bipartisan majorities in the past three Congresses, but was not brought to the floor for a vote. Murphy pledged to work to bring this bill to the floor for a vote this Congress.

"This bill is long overdue, and it defies logic to allow it to languish any longer. I came to Congress to fix our broken healthcare system, and this bill is a good first step to addressing one of the many problems within that system," said Murphy.