

Murphy Praises Progress on Mental Health Parity Bill

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - After years of garnering bipartisan support but no action in the House of Representatives, today Congressman Chris Murphy (CT-5) praised the passage of the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act, legislation cosponsored by Murphy that aims to eliminate disparities in health coverage for mental healthcare.

"There is simply no basis for insurers treating physical illness differently than mental illness. Depression can be treated just like hypertension, and insurance discrimination isn't just bad policy, its bad medicine. This bill is long overdue, and I'm proud to have played a role in its passage," said Murphy.

According to the National Institutes of Health, mental illness and substance abuse are biological diseases, yet private and public health insurers make it increasingly difficult for patients to get treatment for these diseases. It is estimated that 54 million Americans currently suffer from mental illness and 24 million from some form of chemical dependence. But last year alone, 270,000 Americans were denied addiction treatment, 150,000 Americans died from chemical addiction, and 30,000 Americans committed suicide from depression.

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. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office has estimated a miniscule impact on premiums from the mental health parity bill - just two-tenths of one percent.

The State of Connecticut has been a leader on the mental health parity 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 for many residents. However, this pressing issue must be addressed nationwide as many Connecticut residents are covered by health insurance plans that do not fall under the state mental health parity law.

"Left untreated, mental health issues manifest themselves into physical health problems. So by making it easier for people to treat their mental health problems, we are preventing other medical costs. It's a win-win for the patient and the healthcare industry," said Murphy.

Murphy has been pushing this legislation with the bill's chief sponsor, Congressman Patrick Kennedy (RI-01). In December, Kennedy came to Hartford to join Murphy in a roundtable discussion about mental health parity with a large group of mental health experts from across the state, including former Lieutenant Governor Kevin Sullivan, representatives from the Connecticut Psychological Association, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and the Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery.

The Senate has passed their version of a mental health parity bill; next, the two chambers will meet to work out the differences in the legislation.

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