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Parity: Fair coverage for mental health treatment

Treat mental illness like any other health condition

Access to medical care is being hotly debated right now. One form of medical care that is particularly difficult for our citizens to access is mental health treatment.

This year Florida Representative and Orthopedic Surgeon Ed Homan, M.D. is sponsoring HB 19/SB164 that would adopt parity in insurance coverage, so that mental health benefits would have to equal benefits for all other illnesses. Area Rep. Charles S. "Chuck" Chestnut, of Gainesville, is a co-sponsor of the parity bill.

At the national level, following the Senate's historic passage of the Mental Health Parity Act (S. 558) by unanimous consent in September, the House is poised to take up its bill, H.R. 1424, on Wednesday, March 5.

Mental illnesses are common. The daily lives of about 10 percent of our population are directly impacted by one of the severe and debilitating mental illnesses (1 percent have schizophrenia, 2 percent bipolar disorder, and about 7 percent experience major depression). That's about 20,000 households in just Gainesville and Alachua county . About 1 in 5 families are impacted by a loved one with some sort of diagnosable mental disorder every year. The mental illnesses are unavoidable biological medical conditions of brain cells that are independent of a person's character or values.

Treatment works, but most go without. Success rates are about 60-80 percent for recovery from the mental illnesses with proper and adequate treatment, which exceeds the 40-50 percent treatment success rate for heart disease. However, fewer than one-third of adults and half of children with a diagnosable mental disorder receive any level of treatment in any one year.

Mental illness affects health and health care. Half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14, three-quarters by age 24. According to the NIH (National Institutes of Health) researchers, treating cases early could prevent enormous disability, before a mental illness progresses and becomes more severe.

Mental illnesses affect the workplace. In the U.S., the annual economic indirect cost of mental illnesses is estimated to be \$79 billion. Most of that amount, approximately \$63 billion, reflects the loss of productivity as a result of these medical conditions.

Parity is a good value. Providing insurance coverage for mental illnesses equal to that for physical illness does not drive up the cost of mental health care as many insurers feared, a recent study of health benefits for federal employees says. A report of the US Surgeon General determined that in states in which legislation requires parity of mental health and general coverage, cost increases are nearly imperceptible. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management notes that adequate mental health and substance abuse benefits coverage improves patient health, provides patients with greater financial protection against unforeseen costs, and reduces workplace absences and employee disabilities.

Untreated mental illnesses bear heavy costs. Suicide was the 11th leading cause of death among Americans in 2000. The vast majority of all people who die by suicide have a mental illness, often undiagnosed or untreated.

Mental illnesses (including depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia) account for nearly 25 percent

of all disability across major industrialized countries. Criminal Justice

According to a 2006 Bureau of Justice report, more than half of all prison and jail inmates had a mental health problem.

Inadequate health care coverage is a leading cause of custody relinquishment for youth. Thousands of youth are placed each year in child welfare or juvenile justice systems due to unmet intensive mental health needs, according to the US General Accounting Office.

We urge Alachua County residents to support national and Florida legislative efforts to support parity, and to contact representatives to vote for national bill HR1424 and Florida bills HB 19/SB164. Help us to join 46 other states that have already enacted laws for mental health "parity" to treat disorders of brain cells that affect mood, thought, or behavior like any other medical and physical illness.

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