



Capitol Day 2007

Access to Behavioral Health Care

In the wake of the horrific Virginia Tech shootings, Pennsylvania and the entire nation have again opened the dialogue on a variety of issues, including behavioral health. As the largest state association representing behavioral health issues, PCPA is part of the national movement to address access to adequate behavioral healthcare. A member of the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare (NCCBH) and winner of the NCCBH *2007 Award for Excellence in Grassroots Advocacy*, the association is supportive of national parity legislation as long as protections are in place for existing strong state laws.

Federal Parity Legislation

This legislation is essential because treatment for mental health and substance use issues works. All Americans must be afforded the opportunity to seek such treatment when the need arises. The *1999 Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health* and the *2003 President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health* both make this point. These reports state that such conditions must be treated with the same urgency and status as physical health problems. Assuring that health insurance plans recognize this and provide coverage in a manner equitable to other health conditions is a significant step forward in improving the overall health of citizens.

PCPA Position

It is important that this federal legislation be enacted now. Various states, including Pennsylvania, are considering universal health care proposals. Without federal legislation setting a minimum standard for parity in the treatment of mental health and substance use disorders, states may be tempted to emulate policies of commercial plans that severely limit such coverage. The federal government has the responsibility to assure that all citizens have vital services protected, such as healthcare, regardless of where someone lives.

Simultaneously, federal legislation need only establish a floor and should not pre-empt state legislation that provides greater protection of coverage for behavioral health disorders. Such is the case with Pennsylvania's Act 106 for drug and alcohol treatment under commercial insurance which is not clearly protected in Senate Bill 558, a parity bill being considered by the US Senate. PCPA does not believe this is the intention, but protections for such state laws must be in place – both by making sure language in the House bill reflects this and inserting such language in the current companion Senate bill.

State Legislative Support

State legislators are urged to contact members of Pennsylvania's congressional delegation urging support for the parity legislation, with support for the inclusion of protections for strong state laws such as Pennsylvania's Act 106 for drug and alcohol treatment.

Additionally, as discussed in PCPA's information sheet *Prescription for Pennsylvania: How the Proposal Interfaces With Behavioral Health and Mental Retardation*, any Pennsylvania-based universal health care plan must include behavioral health treatment and services.