

Altmire Votes to Strengthen Health Insurance Coverage of Mental Illness

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(Washington, DC) -- U.S. Congressman Jason Altmire (PA-04) today voted for landmark legislation that ensures patients seeking mental health services have access to the same health insurance benefits as those seeking treatment for other ailments. The Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act (H.R. 1424) ensures that group health plans do not charge higher co-payments and deductibles, impose maximum out-of-pocket limits or lower day and visit limits on mental health services. This bill passed by a vote of 268-148.

"The discrepancies between health insurance coverage for mental and physical illnesses jeopardizes Americans' access to much-needed care," Altmire said. "This legislation will end discrimination by diagnosis and ensure that patients seeking mental health services are no longer penalized with higher co-payments and coverage restrictions. The passage of this bill is a key step towards ending the stigma that still surrounds mental illness and lowering the appallingly high number of people with mental illness who go without treatment."

Last March, Congressman Altmire held a hearing with Congressman Tim Murphy (PA-18) in Pittsburgh to highlight the need for mental health parity. It is estimated that nearly two-thirds of the roughly 44 million Americans suffering from mental illnesses in any given year do not receive treatment.

"Not only is parity a fair and affordable solution to insurance discrimination but it will save lives," Marc Cherna, the Director of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services wrote in a letter supporting the bill. "Treating mental health disorders is also cost effective because it reduces the costs of treatment for physical health disorders and results in subsequent reduction in the utilization of other healthcare services."

There is ample evidence that mental health parity will not result in a financial burden for businesses. Over the last eight years, the Federal Employee Health Benefits Program (FEHBP) has made "parity" coverage for mental health care available to Members of Congress and 8.5 million other federal employees. Research has shown that there has been no significant cost increase attributable to this parity requirement in FEHBP. Additionally, the mental health parity bill passed by Congress today would exempt small businesses with 50 or fewer employees and businesses that experience a premium increase of two percent or more in the first year.

Congressman Altmire also led a letter to Speaker Nancy Pelosi in support of action to prevent the formation of new physician-owned hospitals. This language was included to offset costs to the mental health parity bill. By preventing physicians from referring patients to hospitals in which they have a financial interest and ownership stake in, this provision will save Medicare and Medicaid nearly \$2.3 billion over ten years. It will also strengthen the long term viability of full service community hospitals and ensure patients retain access to comprehensive, quality care.