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Wisconsin Governor Signs Mental-Health Parity Measure Into Law

Health insurers must provide coverage for treatment services for people with mental disorders, alcoholism and drug-abuse conditions under mental-health parity legislation signed into law by Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle.

Under S.B. 362, group health insurance policies must cover treatment services for these conditions at the same level as other types of medical treatment, according to a statement from Doyle's office. The law also eliminates the minimum annual amounts of coverage that a group policy must provide for individuals with these conditions.

The law also requires a group health benefit plan to make available to an insured or a plan participant the plan's criteria for determining medical necessity for coverage and the reason for any denial of coverage, according to S.B. 362. It also applies to a government self-insured health plan or an individual health-benefit plan that provides coverage of treatment for mental health or substance abuse problems.

Wisconsin Sens. David Hansen and Robert Wirch and Reps. Sandy Pasch and Jon Richards worked on the bill.

At the federal level, health insurers face adjustments to mental-health parity coverage that took effect this year. An update adopted in 2008 expanded some provisions of parity (BestWire, Jan. 11, 2010) However, larger group plans, which are the ones affected by the law, are not required to offer coverage for mental illnesses.

Attempts to speak with Doyle's press office and America's Health Insurance Plans weren't successful.

In April, a coalition of managed behavioral health care organizations tried to halt the federal mental health parity law set to be fully adopted in July, filing a lawsuit in federal court in the District of Columbia, claiming they weren't given a full, proper opportunity to comment on the rules before they were finalized (BestWire, April 9, 2010).

In basic terms, the new law established by the "Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008," says group plans with more than 50 employees must -- if they offer mental health benefits -- do so on an equal basis with other medical benefits.

The Coalition for Parity sued the U.S. departments of Health and Human Services, Labor and Treasury -- the agencies responsible for the rules -- contending the rules that eventually emerged "exceeds their statutory authority" and impose "unattainable and costly requirements" on the industry (BestWire, April 9, 2010).

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