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## Doyle to consider bill on 'mental health parity' in insurance plans

BY JOE POTENTE  
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A bill now headed to Gov. Jim Doyle's desk would narrow a gap in federal law requiring equitable treatment of those with mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders.

Wisconsin's "mental health parity" measure requires all group health plans that cover mental illness to provide these benefits at the same level as other types of treatment.

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It scraps a \$7,000-per-year minimum treatment level that was set a quarter century ago that separated mental illness and substance abuse from other types of treatment that do not have thresholds.

"It helps the people who have insurance plans that have mental health coverage, it allows that mental health coverage to come up with the other health coverages," said Jack

Rose, president of the Kenosha County chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. "It doesn't expand it, but it's a step in the right direction. It's positive."

Under the bill, parity would be required for those covered under employee health insurance plans offered by employers with 10 or more employees. A federal parity law that took effect late last year only applies to self-insured companies with 50 or more workers.

The bill would ensure coverage for an additional 700,000 Wisconsin residents, according to supporters.

"I'm very happy about that," said state Sen. Robert Wirsch, D-Pleasant Prairie, a longtime supporter of the bill. "I think that it helps stop some of the discrimination against people with mental illness. I think it's long overdue."

Doyle, who now has the opportunity to sign the bill into law, has indicated support for it in the past.

Opponents have cited the potential costs of providing parity.

Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce and the National Federation of Independent Business sent lawmakers a joint memo earlier this week, opposing additional health care mandates and citing a report from the state Office of the Commissioner of Insurance projecting that the mental health parity bill would increase health insurance costs statewide by \$40 million.

The New Day Coalition, a Madison-based organization that supported the bill, counters that parity will reduce the costs associated with untreated mental illnesses, an amount that totals \$80 billion to \$100 billion annually in the nation.

Rose said major mental disorders cost the United States at least \$193 billion annually in lost earnings alone.

This, Rose said, comes as jails and prisons have become the largest psychiatric wards in the nation, housing 350,000 inmates with serious mental illnesses while about 70,000 are residing in hospitals.

State Rep. Peter Barca, D-Kenosha, said he believes parity is beneficial to those it covers and others.

"I believe that when people get the help up front that they need, it helps keep them out of harm's way and helps keep other people out of harm's way," Barca said Friday.

The Assembly passed the bill on a 57-40 vote, with all of the house's Democrats and six Republicans supporting it. It passed the Senate 20-13 in

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Rose credited the work of Rep. Sandy Pasch, D-Whitefish Bay, a psychiatric nurse and first-term lawmaker who shepherded the bill through the Assembly.

"It's been a long time in coming for this state," Rose said.

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