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Our view: County right about mental health parity

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La Crosse County took a principled stand on insurance coverage of mental health care for its employees - and county leaders should be congratulated for doing so.

Counties are the mental health care providers of last resort, picking up the pieces when insurance fails to cover mental health in the same way it covers physical health. So the county appropriately decided that it couldn't in good conscience take advantage of a loophole in the federal law mandating parity between physical and mental health care coverage.

And loopholes there are many, loopholes that help the bill gain passage but eviscerated the idea championed by the late Sen. Paul Wellstone. One such loophole allows non-federal government entities that provide employees with self-funded group health plan coverage to exempt their plans from the federal mandate.

How's that for a mouthful?

The city of La Crosse took advantage of that loophole - which means its employees will have to bargain for mental health care parity if they choose to go after it. That's not the case for

La Crosse County. In short, while health care benefits themselves remain negotiable, mental health care is covered in the same way as physical health care.

Mental health care parity will continue to be a significant issue, as well it should be. Untreated mental illnesses, including alcohol and drug addiction, are at the root of far too many of our communities' problems to ignore. From lack of employment skills to crowded jails, from truancy and educational under-achievement to homelessness, untreated or under-treated mental illness all too often is the root cause.

The Wisconsin Legislature is considering removing statutory language that merely sets minimum standards for mental health care coverage in the state and replacing it with parity requirements that would close some of the egregious loopholes in the federal 2008 Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act, also known as the Wellstone-Domenici Parity Act.

Governments at all levels pick up the cost of untreated mental illness in the form of criminal justice and social services for people whose conditions prevent them from becoming productive members of society. The county's recognition that this indeed is an important issue stems in no small part from the energy it expends daily on cleaning up the messes our haphazard approach to mental health care creates.

That kind of recognition is imperative on a statewide and nationwide basis if we wish to end our current patchwork of programs and policies that merely put outrageously ineffective - and ruinously expensive - bandages on what are, in fact, gaping wounds that could be prevented entirely by appropriate treatment of the mentally ill.