



## **ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE REFORM**

**Representative, Jon Richards, Chair**

**Testimony of Joy Mead-Meucci  
Director, Behavioral Health, Aurora Health Care**

**Wisconsin Mental Health and Substance Abuse Parity Act, AB-512  
Relating to: health insurance coverage of nervous and mental disorders,  
alcoholism, and other drug abuse problems.**

**Room 417, North, State Capitol  
Wednesday, October 28, 2009, 11:45 a.m.**

Chairperson Richards and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear on behalf of Aurora Health Care to testify in favor of Assembly Bill 512, which would require all group health insurance plans in Wisconsin to provide mental health and substance abuse disorder benefits at parity levels. My name is Joy Mead-Meucci, and I serve as the Director of Behavioral Health Services, Aurora Health Care. I have over 30 years of experience in the field of mental health as both a provider and administrator. I want to share our unique perspective with you today, because Aurora Health Care is both a provider of mental health benefits at parity for our employees and a pioneer in providing leading behavioral health treatment for our patients.

Aurora Behavioral Health Services is the largest behavioral health care provider in the State of Wisconsin. Over a 1000 psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, counselors, nurses, and other dedicated staff treat more than 20,000 patients each year in 21 outpatient clinics, a free-standing psychiatric hospital, and 2 hospital-based inpatient units.

Aurora Health Care has a unique perspective to share not only because we are a provider of behavioral health treatment in the communities in which we serve, but are also the largest private employer in the State. We have been a provider of mental health benefits to our employees at parity since 2002. Our experience has shown that putting our employees first by extending coverage at parity has assured our employees they will get the help they need, when and how they need it.

We are often asked about the numbers; what is the cost, and what are the claims. Since 2002 our costs and claims have been statistically unchanged before and after parity, averaging between 2.5 to 2.9 percent of all claims annually. Since the inception of parity at Aurora Health Care, behavioral health claims vs. the total number of claims paid has stayed the same with a .6% variance.

Parity benefits both employers and employees. We know nationally up to 68% of all employees will, at some time during their work life, experience problems severe enough to prevent them from coping with their day-to-day responsibilities. During the best and certainly in the worst of economic times, we know consumers of mental health benefits who lack insurance, or have insufficient coverage, may postpone getting treatment, over-utilize emergency room services, stop taking prescribed medication, stop therapy if they run out of benefits, deteriorate, and lose their jobs. Replacing an employee, according to

the Department of Labor, costs an additional one-third to one-half of an employee's annual salary. This doesn't have to happen. Providing treatment for an employee just makes good business sense.

In addition, Aurora has been committed to provide care for the uninsured and underinsured consumer of behavioral health services, averaging on a yearly basis over two million dollars in uncompensated care, and close to one half million dollars in charitable care. The under-funded Medicaid shortfall adds another seven million dollars in unfunded care.

Our mental health treatment communities and the consumers they serve are in crisis. In the past 10 years over 70% of private and public inpatient beds have disappeared just in the Southeastern part of the State.

In response to this grave situation, healthcare systems, State and County behavioral health providers, and other concerned community organizations have been working together in collaborative partnerships designed to improve the efficiency and quality of behavioral health care delivery systems throughout the State. But we can't do it alone. We need you as our partner. We need YOUR help in extending this important coverage so consumers affected by mental illness can access the treatment they so desperately seek, just like any other citizen with any other healthcare need. It is the RIGHT thing to do.

We thank Representative Pasch and Senator Hansen for being champions of parity in Wisconsin. Behavioral health services are a critical core component of health care. Wisconsin is nationally recognized as a leader nationwide for quality and access to affordable healthcare. AB 512 continues that tradition.

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to speak today.