



DAILY COVERAGE
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Mental health parity proposed; state briefs

STATE CAPITOL -- More employers would be required to offer insurance coverage for mental health treatment under a plan state lawmakers are considering.

The proposal would expand a federal law signed last year that created what's known as "mental health parity" on a national scale. Parity basically means covering treatment for a mental disorder the same as something like a heart problem.

That federal law excluded businesses with fewer than 50 employees. Rep. Sandy Pasch, D-Milwaukee, says her plan would close that gap, so that all employers who offer insurance are covering mental illnesses.

She says mental health problems are "not a life choice, a moral weakness or a character flaw." Pasch says mental illness can't be willed away just as heart attacks or diabetes can't be willed away.

But Bill Smith with the Wisconsin chapter of the National Federation of Independent Businesses says Congress got it right when they excluded small businesses from the parity law.

Smith says this state proposal would force small businesses to either cut back on other coverage, raise premiums, or cut salaries. He says the legislation may improve the quality

of health care for a few, but the real impact is higher health insurance costs for small business.

The plan has mostly Democratic sponsors. Similar legislation has been introduced in the past, but not with the full legislature and governor's office under Democratic control.

-- Shawn Johnson, WHA/WERN-Madison

Poll shows Wisconsin residents satisfied with health benefits, but still support reform

Most people in Wisconsin are satisfied with their health care coverage. But they still think reform is needed. The issue was raised in the latest Wisconsin Public Radio St. Norbert College survey.

Out of 400 people surveyed, a whopping 83 percent said they were at least somewhat satisfied with their health insurance policies. Another 89 percent said they like the quality of care they get.

Still, most think the nation's health care system as a whole needs some reform.

Wendy Scattergood, a political scientist and analyst with St. Norbert College's survey center, says most think that reform requires some government intervention. She says more than half the respondents favor a federal insurance plan similar to Medicare that would compete with private insurance companies.

She says 54 percent favor the so-called 'public option,' but the survey question didn't call it a public option, it referred to the definition that's been used in congress.

Nearly 60 percent of respondents favor requiring people to buy health coverage in the same way car insurance is often required. They also want limits on medical malpractice suits.

Also more than 75 percent of those asked said insurance companies shouldn't be able