



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: State Representative Jon Richards, Chair
Members, Assembly Committee on Health and Healthcare Reform

FROM: Kim Wadas, Associate Director, Education and Health Care

DATE: October 28, 2009

RE: Assembly Bill 512, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Parity

On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, the public policy voice of Wisconsin's Roman Catholic bishops, I wish to express our support for Assembly Bill 512. This bill would enhance health insurance coverage requirements in Wisconsin for mental illness and substance abuse, ensuring that those who work for businesses with 50 or fewer employees who suffer from these conditions receive the same care and treatment as those who have physical health issues.

AB 512 proposes a sensible policy that reflects medical science's current understanding of the intricate link between mental and physical health. Mental health conditions and substance abuse can be as debilitating as any physical injury, and yet, those who suffer such affliction have traditionally not received the same opportunity to access treatment. Recently implemented federal law recognizes the importance of mental health and substance abuse treatment by requiring parity for such treatment in health insurance coverage for those employers who retain over 50 employees.

This bill corrects inequity by removing the state's minimum coverage amounts for group health insurance for these conditions and instead requiring that most group insurers provide the same coverage for the treatment of mental health and substance abuse conditions as they would for any physical ailment. The bill also ensures that certain individual plans that opt to provide mental health and substance abuse coverage do so in a manner that is equivalent to the coverage provided for the treatment of physical conditions. It also ensures certain mental health screenings are provided.

The human person is more than a physical body. Our human nature blends the physical with the intellectual and spiritual. The latter two may be harder to quantify, but are no less deserving of our attention. Further, each of us possesses an innate dignity with which, in the words of the Founders, we are endowed by the Creator. This human dignity is present even when one is physically, mentally, or emotionally afflicted.

Since all of us suffer when illness robs our neighbor of his or her ability to contribute to the community, we have a shared responsibility to support those who find themselves in a condition

of serious mental illness. The mental health needs of our neighbors, no less than their physical well-being are a proper concern of public policy. It is, therefore, appropriate for laws to foster greater equity in how we deal with mental and physical illness.

Proper treatment of mental health and substance abuse not only serves the human dignity of the individual afflicted with a condition or addiction; it also serves to enhance the safety and security of our communities. Indeed, one of the issues that continually surfaced as the bishops studied the issue of crime and the criminal justice system in this state was the percentage of prisoners with mental illness and addictions. Mental illness and substance abuse issues also clearly intertwine with other social concerns such as poverty.

Establishing parity coverage for those who suffer from substance abuse, mental health issues, and physical illness, recognizes the fullness of the human person and fosters a consistent life ethic. These are worthy policy objectives.

We respectfully request your support for AB 512 and thank you for your consideration.