



COMMUNITY ADVOCATES
Public Policy Institute

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STATE MOVES TO PARITY FOR MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER TREATMENT IN BADGERCARE BENCHMARK PLAN

Move Follows Passage of the Wisconsin Parity Act

Milwaukee (May 10, 2010)—The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) has announced that it is eliminating all dollar amount and service limitations for mental health and substance use disorder treatment for the BadgerCare Plus Benchmark Plan. This decision brings mental illness and substance use disorder treatment to parity levels—equal to the treatment provided in medical care—for the 14,496 children and pregnant or postpartum women (as of March 2010) enrolled in the Benchmark Plan, part of the state’s public Medicaid program known as BadgerCare Plus. The new parity policy is retroactive to January 1, 2010.

The department’s decision follows from requirements of the federal *Wellstone-Domenici Act*, a law requiring Medicaid managed care organizations (HMOs) and large employers that offer mental health and substance use disorder treatment to do so at parity levels. According to David R. Riemer, director of the Community Advocates Public Policy Institute and one of the original architects of BadgerCare, DHS deserves credit for moving forward to eliminate treatment limits for enrollees who receive benefits through fee-for-service coverage as well as those signed up with HMOs.

“I want to commend Gov. Jim Doyle, Department of Health Services Secretary Karen Timberlake, Medicaid Director Jason Helgeson and their staffs for moving forward on this important decision. Because of their action, nearly 15,000 Wisconsin children and women will now have access to parity-level treatment for mental illness and substance use disorder,” said Riemer.

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Benchmark Plan / Add One

DHS' decision ends the minimum \$7,000 per year benefit coverage and service limitations for mental health and substance use disorder treatment, in place since 1985.

Riemer continued: "I'd like to express particular appreciation for the department's clarification that parity applies to mental health and substance use disorder treatment for Benchmark Plan recipients who receive coverage on a fee-for-service basis, as well as those enrolled in managed care organizations (HMOs)."

For more information on DHS' decision on the BadgerCare Plus Benchmark Plan, visit <https://www.forwardhealth.wi.gov/kw/pdf/2010-32.pdf>

DHS Decision Latest Advance as Trend to Increased Treatment Grows

The extension of parity-level treatment to Benchmark Plan participants is the fourth major advance in increased coverage of mental health and substance use disorder treatment in the last several months.

Other major advances are:

- **Passage of the *Wisconsin Parity Act* by the Wisconsin Legislature.** This new legislation, signed into law by Gov. Doyle on April 29 after receiving bipartisan support in Senate and Assembly votes, will require private individual and group health insurance plans in Wisconsin to provide mental health and substance use disorder benefits at parity levels. When this legislation takes effect at the end of 2010, it will provide parity with physical conditions for the 1.4 million adults and children in Wisconsin who have some form of mental illness, as well as the 403,000 Wisconsinites who have substance use disorders who were left behind by the *Wellstone-Domenici Act*, which exempts employers with 50 or fewer employees.

For more information on the *Wisconsin Parity Act*, visit www.ParityForWisconsin.org.

- **Recommendation to expand mental health and substance use disorder services for the BadgerCare Plus Core Plan.** The Clinical Advisory Committee on Health and Emerging Technologies (CACHET), a DHS committee established to advise the department on effective prioritization of health care services, approved by a 10-1 vote the DHS proposal to provide outpatient addiction and mental health benefits for the BadgerCare Plus Core Plan. If approved by Sec. Timberlake and the federal government, this change will enable Core Plan enrollees—low-income adults without dependent children—to visit any combination of doctors, and addiction or mental health treatment providers up to 20 visits per year.

The Core Plan currently covers approximately 65,000 people.

- **Provisions in the federal health care reform bill which improve mental health and substance use disorder prevention, treatment and recovery services.**

A major feature of the new *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act* is a requirement that all individual and small group health plans provide an essential health benefits package that includes mental health and substance use disorder services. In addition, these plans must comply with the *Wellstone-Domenici Act* requirement that mental health and substance use benefits be provided on an equal basis with other covered medical and surgical benefits.

For brief summaries by the Washington, D.C.-based Legal Action Center of the major substance use disorder and mental illness prevention, treatment and recovery provisions in the federal health insurance reform law, visit the Public Policy Institute Web site, www.ca-ppi.org.

“The law is finally catching up with the science when it comes to treating substance use disorder and mental illness, chronic diseases for which treatment works to help men and women living with these diseases get their lives back together,” said Riemer. “At both the state and federal levels, the law is moving rapidly to recognize—and treat—substance use disorder and mental illness as the chronic diseases that they are.”

Community Advocates’ Public Policy Institute has clear and simple goals: To explain why so many Milwaukeeans are poor, and to develop and implement a practical strategy to reduce poverty throughout Wisconsin.