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Mental health, substance abuse issues topic of symposiums

Advocates want treatment equal to other illnesses

By Patti Zarling
 pzarling@greenbaypressgazette.com

Stigma, denial or even homelessness may prevent people from getting help for mental illnesses or substance abuse disorders.

Recent efforts by federal and state legislators help ensure that treatment for such illnesses receives coverage equal to those for other ailments. But advocates say that doesn't mean the book is closed on making sure people who suffer from mental illness or addictions get help.

"Parity is important, meaning if you have a mental illness you get the same treatment you can get if you have cancer or anything else," said David Riemer, director of the Milwaukee-based Community Advocates Public Policy Institute. "But we have to make it real."

Advocates are hosting symposiums on the issue throughout Wisconsin, including one Friday in Green Bay. They hope to gather information about what works, as well as what needs to be fixed. They plan to present a final report to the state.

In the past, insurance companies often provided limited dollars to treat such illnesses. A new federal law requires group health insurance plans that offer coverage for mental health and substance abuse disorders and that cover more than 50 employees, as well as certain Medicaid and local or state government programs, to provide parity in care. That doesn't include individual plans, Medicare or group plans with 50 or fewer employees.

The Wisconsin Mental Health and Alcohol Addictions Parity Act, a bill introduced by state Sen. Dave Hansen, D-Green Bay, and state Rep. Sandy Pasch, D-Whitefish Bay, would expand parity to state residents working for smaller employers.

Supporters hosting a symposium Friday in Green Bay hope to brainstorm ways to make equal access a reality.

"Parity is here for the most part," Riemer said. "But what else do we need beyond parity to make it real, so people get the help they need?"

One big barrier to treatment is the fear some may have about admitting they have mental health issues, he said.

"Some people might not get treated because they're worried about the stigma," Riemer said. "If someone smokes five packs a day and gets cancer, there's no stigma. What can we do as a state to teach children so stigma doesn't get in the way?"

Additional Facts

If you go

Making Parity Real takes place from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, Room 128, Lecture Hall, Student Center, 2740 W. Mason St., Green Bay. Attendance is free but registration is required today. For information or to register, visit www.MakingParityReal.org.

Additional information
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