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## Mental health advocates: Stigmas still hurting treatment options

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Significant challenges remain to erasing the stigmas associated with mental illnesses and ensuring that everyone who needs treatment gets it, according to a panel of experts who spoke Friday.

Advocates hosted a symposium Friday at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College in Green Bay, part of a larger series of events around the state. They hope to gather information about what works in mental health care, as well as what needs to be fixed, and plan to present a final report to the state.

"We know so much more now, yet we've continued coverage of mental illness as if they are moral weaknesses or character flaws," said state Rep. Sandy Pasch, D-Whitefish Bay, who is a co-sponsor of a bill to increase parity for mental illness in Wisconsin.

Federal law recently required group health insurance plans that cover more than 50 employees and offer mental health care to offer parity in care, eliminating the financial limits previously placed on treating mental health. Although the law applies to some Medicaid, local and state programs, it doesn't include individual plans, Medicare or group plans with 50 or fewer employees.

Legislation introduced in the Wisconsin Legislature by Pasch and state Sen. Dave Hansen, D-Green Bay, would close some of the gaps in the federal law. It would require parity in treatment for mental health for employers with 10 to 50 employees.

Pasch, who was a psychiatric nurse before being elected to office, said she hopes the bill will be passed by the end of next month.

Others in the panel spoke of the challenges facing mental health treatment beyond the issue of parity, including a shortage of psychiatrists, case managers, support systems and education.

People suffering from mental illness or substance abuse often need help applying for benefits and require a continuum of care that includes transportation, housing, medication and life skills to help their return to society, said Donajane Brasch of the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Brown County.

"Treatment can be expensive, but the benefits to the individual and the community far outweighs the cost," Brasch said.

Early treatment for children with mental illnesses also could benefit the community, said Susan Jacquez-Dean, a psychiatrist at Aurora Health Care.

"Untreated mental health in kids can lead to depression... and the creation of a vicious cycle," Jacquez-Dean said. "Such kids could end up in the juvenile justice system."

A shortage of psychiatrists and declining numbers of primary care physicians — who are often the first line of defense for mental health — exacerbate the problem, said Linda Roethle, president of the Bellin Health Psychiatric Center. She advocated a change in the residency program for medical school graduates that would offer incentives to remain in the primary care track.

Despite the lingering challenges, panel members agreed parity legislation will help erase some of the stigma toward mental illness and getting much-needed treatment to people who need it.

### Additional Facts

On the Net

[www.makingparityreal.org](http://www.makingparityreal.org)