



Congressmen Kennedy and Ramstad Embark on Nationwide Tour to Promote Mental Health Parity Bill

The Campaign to Insure Mental Health and Addiction Equity

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE January 12, 2007

CONTACT: Robin Costello (401) 729-5600

WASHINGTON- Congressmen Patrick J. Kennedy (D-RI) and Jim Ramstad (R-MN) are embarking on a nationwide tour, traveling to forums taking place in major cities all across the country. The national tour entitled, "*The Campaign to Insure Mental Health and Addiction Equity*," will hear testimony from ordinary American citizens whose lives have been touched by mental illness and addiction.

The first forum in the series is scheduled for Tuesday, January 16, 2006 at the Rhode Island State House. Members of the public, employers, mental health advocates, and health care professionals will share personal stories pertaining to their experience negotiating the health care system as it relates to mental health. The sessions will also include the leadership of all three commercial insurers in Rhode Island. The testimony will be used to help facilitate a comprehensive debate over equal access to health care for mental health and addiction treatment.

"Our goal is to compile testimony from Americans across the country in an effort to pass the most responsible and comprehensive federal equity bill possible, said Congressman Kennedy." Americans with these physiological diseases of the brain pay their premiums like everyone else and their insurance should be there when they need it, like it is for everyone else. Every family in America has, in some way, come face to face with the burden of these diseases and the difficulty in getting care. We pay enormously, as individuals and as a society, the costs of leaving these diseases untreated. It's time for action."

The Congressmen are preparing to reintroduce federal legislation aimed at ensuring that health plans offer fair coverage for mental health and addiction care. The bill, called the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act after the late Senator who championed the cause, had majority support in past Congresses but was blocked from consideration by House leadership. The new House Leaders have promised Congressmen Kennedy and Ramstad that they will bring the bill up for a vote.

"The American people should not be forced to wait any longer for Congress to knock down the barriers to treatment for mental illness and chemical addiction," said Congressman Ramstad. "Congress must hear their call and pass the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act."

Additional forums are being organized across the country by Mental Health America (formerly the National Mental Health Association) and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI).

Congressmen Kennedy and Ramstad will join other Members of Congress at scheduled forums in Minnesota, Maryland, Los Angeles, and Washington State leading up to Congressional hearings in Washington, D.C.

The Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act expands the Mental Health Parity Act of 1996 by requiring group health plans to offer benefits for mental health and addiction on the same terms as care for other diseases. The legislation closes the loopholes that allow plans to charge higher copayments, coinsurance, deductibles, and maximum out-of-pocket limits and impose lower day and visit limits on mental health addiction care.

"Every day that we allow insurance discrimination against mental illnesses is another day 82 Americans will die of suicide," said Kennedy. "It's another day that American business will lose \$85 million in lost productivity to depression alone. It's another day that thousands of children will be in state custody instead of home with their parents. It's another night on the streets for 200,000 homeless Americans living with mental illness and addictions. We cannot afford the status quo."

According to the Government Accountability Office, nearly 90 percent of plans impose such financial limitations and treatment restrictions on mental health and addiction care despite voluminous scientific research documenting the biological, genetic, and chemical nature of these diseases, and the effectiveness of treatment. The bill applies to group health plans of 50 or more people.

The legislation is modeled after the Federal Employees Health Benefit Program, which covers Members of Congress and other federal workers and dependents and which implemented parity in 2001. According to an exhaustive study published earlier this year by the Department of Health and Human Services, the federal employees' parity policy was implemented with "little or no increase in total MH/SA [mental health/substance abuse] spending".

A majority of respondents to a Mental Health America survey indicated that they would support equity legislation even if it meant a \$1 per month increase to their premiums. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that such legislation will increase health care costs by far less than that amount.

Forum Schedule:

Jan. 16 Providence, RI District of Rep. Patrick Kennedy

Jan. 22 Minneapolis, MN District of Rep. Jim Ramstad

Jan 29 Rockville, MD District of Rep. Chris Van Hollen

Feb. 10 Los Angeles, CA District of Rep. Grace Napolitano

Feb. 17 Vancouver, WA District of Rep. Brian Baird

*dates pending in many other locations

###