

Mental Health Coverage – A Time for Action

Amy Safford 5.12.17

The recent passage of the American Health Care Act (AHCA) in the House of Representatives has the potential to cut America's Medicaid program by \$882 billion, and to roll back critical health benefits and protections for people with pre-existing conditions. At particular risk are community members who suffer with addiction and mental health disorders because a disproportionate number of them rely heavily on Medicaid (or MaineCare) for health insurance.

On top of this, the AHCA bill will weaken Obamacare's Mental Health and Addiction Parity Act, allowing states to exempt themselves from the requirement that health insurers provide the same benefits for mental health and substance use disorder as for medical coverage. Simply put, people who suffer from depression, anxiety, bipolar or any other mental disorder can be denied coverage, and when a person reaches a lifetime cap, insurance companies can stop paying for addiction treatment.

The devastating impact of untreated mental health and addiction disorders in the nation is apparent every day, in every community. According to the 2016 MaineHealth Health Index Report, Maine had the fifth largest increase in the nation in drug overdoses from 2012 to 2015. And just in the last year, we saw a 40% surge in deaths, losing 378 Mainers to drug addiction in 2016.

Maine Behavioral Healthcare is responding to the epidemic by leading a MaineHealth effort to partner primary care with behavioral health and substance abuse experts. The goal is to provide a combination of therapy and Integrated Medication Assisted Therapy (IMAT) in intensive outpatient clinics and in partnership with primary care practices to match the right level of care to the person.

If mental health and addiction funding is cut, our ability to roll out this new model is in jeopardy. Like every other behavioral healthcare and addiction provider, we struggle with a level of funding provided by the state, and funds to cover the uninsured.

When you add in the stress of a limited workforce, with mental health and addiction providers across the state looking for a trained talent pool, the ability to continue to provide these crucial services is dangerously compromised. The most vulnerable Mainers – the elderly, children and those who suffer with addiction disorders – are the most at risk in this crisis.

A significant concern is the number of children in Maine without health insurance (6.5%), which is higher than the national average (6.2%) according to the 2017 Maine Kids Count report. A strong foundation for kids to thrive is essential to their lifelong health trajectory – and to influencing subsequent costs to the system and taxpayers. Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs (family poverty, divorce, substance abuse, sexual abuse, bullying) can lead to challenging behaviors in children, and alcohol and drug abuse in adolescents and adults.

An alarming statistic is the rising child and teen suicide rate: 6.9 per 100,000 deaths in 2014 – a 30% increase since 2012. Children are a barometer for the stressors on families and the need for more services to reach every corner of the state. If we sit back and let the AHCA pass into law, we are letting

our most vulnerable Mainers fall through the cracks. Take action today by contacting your legislator – King, Collins or Pingree – and letting them know why this new healthcare proposal is not for Maine or the nation. Let's get behind better healthcare coverage to support a healthy generation for tomorrow.