

Critical Health Care Spending Is Still Misplaced by Bob Sharpe

Given the economic downturn, it's no surprise that mental health services are underfunded in Florida and across the nation. However, with all the recent attention on health care—including a heavy focus on mental health—it is shocking that one of Florida's longest-running issues has remained unresolved and ignored.

Section 409.912(4)(b) of Florida Statutes requires Medicaid managed care organizations, including HMOs, to spend 80 percent of their behavioral health care capitation rates on direct care for those with mental illnesses. Yet for some reason, this crucial piece of legislation, which was enacted to protect the best interests of patients, has been enforced in only 62 of the 67 counties.

HMOs and other managed care organizations in Broward, Duval, Baker, Clay and Nassau are able to spend at whatever level they choose for mental health care. Consequently, community mental health agencies in these counties have lost as much as half of their Medicaid revenues resulting in substantial cuts in programs and services.

Not surprisingly, the loss of such programs and services affects all aspects of society – and further damages our economy. It increases the strain on already overburdened emergency rooms, creates turmoil in our work places and classrooms, adds to the workload for already-overburdened law enforcement officers and severely limits Florida's ability to help individuals in crisis.

For too long, the five Medicaid Reform counties have neglected their responsibilities to individuals suffering with mental illnesses—and for too long, the state has let them. Efforts have been made over recent years to put an end to this alarming double standard, but so far, they have been to no avail.

Florida already ranks 48th in per capita spending for mental health care and cannot afford to be ignored any longer. With health care near the forefront of the nation's concerns during this economic downturn, Florida's mental health care problem must be resolved finally. The Florida Legislature must amend Section 409.91211 of the Florida Statutes to reaffirm that the 80 percent requirement applies in all counties, not just 62 of them.

The citizens of Florida's five Medicaid Reform counties deserve the same basic equal protections provided by law. We cannot continue shortchanging citizens with behavioral health disorders. Reform should offer Florida's citizens adequate care and begin to reverse the challenges of our mental health system. The Legislature must show leadership by acting now.

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