

Official urges public to support mental health insurance parity

BY PAUL COLLINS
THE CHRONICLE

Andy Hagler, executive director of the Mental Health Association of Forsyth County Inc., urges the public to support a mental health insurance parity bill that has been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The Mental Health Equitable Treatment Act of 2002 would provide for equal coverage of mental health benefits with respect to health insurance coverage unless comparable limitations are imposed on medical and surgical benefits.

Hagler, an advocate for mental health, said parity means that insurance companies would have to provide the same level of coverage for mental health and physical illnesses.

He urges people to take a look at their insurance coverage now and compare the maximum lifetime benefit for physical illness and the maximum lifetime benefit for mental health and substance abuse. Chances are, Hagler said, the insurance policy will offer much greater benefits for physical illness than for mental illness and substance abuse.

"We need to talk to our legislators on the Senate and House sides (of Congress) to support mental health parity," Hagler said. He also recommends that people contact their state legislators to support mental health insurance parity.

Hagler said many Americans are experiencing barriers to mental health care because of the inequality of insurance coverage.



Hagler

"A lot of people think (insurance) premiums will go sky-high (if mental health insurance parity is required by law) ... but studies of states with

mental health parity (now) show it is affordable," Hagler said. On average, he said, insurance premiums increase about 1 percent.

Hagler said lack of parity "gives insurance companies tacit permission to discriminate against people with mental illness."

He said some people can't get the mental health services they need or they have maxed out their lifetime benefit.

Hagler said he hopes that the trial of Andrea Yates, the Texas woman sentenced to life in prison for drowning her children, and the movie "A Beautiful Mind," which won best picture of the year recently, will get the public to open up and talk about mental health. "The window of opportunity ... (is open for people to start) push-

ing for mental health parity," he said.

However, Steven Pearce - the director for the Citizens Commission on Human Rights of Seattle, a psychiatric watchdog group founded in 1969 by the Church of Scientology - wrote in an opinion column Feb. 10, 1999, in the Seattle Times that mental health insurance parity is a concept doomed to failure that would cost the tax-paying public millions of dollars. He noted that in 1994 the U.S. Department of Justice collected \$480 million in fines and penalties for health-care fraud, of which 79 percent was from the psychiatric industry.

He wrote that diagnosis of mental disorders is "entirely subjective" because of the lack of precise boundaries. He wrote that insurance companies "have

learned that the mental-health diagnosis will invariably not only fit the coverage, but that the length of time it takes to treat that problem will miraculously be exactly the amount of time the insurance pays for treatment." That's a major reason that insurance companies, concerned about the bottom line, have tried to limit mental-health coverage, he wrote.

He wrote that if mental-health-insurance parity is required by law that insurance companies will be faced with either raising rates or reducing medical coverage.

He wrote that, according to survey data submitted to the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee in 1995, the general public has little or no interest in increased mental-health coverage.

Class

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how to eat right), exercise, first aid, safety, reading comprehension (including "survival" words), how to read a newspaper, job skills (how to look for a job, how to present oneself), following directions and many other survival skills. Sometimes the students do crafts, such as last Thursday, when each student made a God's eye, a colorful Mexican craft made of sticks and yarn to represent good luck.

The class goes on field trips, such as to museums, the N.C. Zoo. Members of the class also volunteer in the community, such as at Salvation Army and Crisis Control. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks the class made patriotic pins out of safety pins and red, white and blue beads (which they strung by hand), and even made one for President Bush.

Karen was pleased when she talked about being able to live independently in a house with two other women in the class. She talked proudly about being able to do a variety of chores. For example, she said she can rake the yard, mop the floor, pack her lunch, do her own laundry and iron her clothes for the next day. (She was wearing a neatly pressed outfit.) "I can ride the (city transit) bus," she said. She works at a steak restaur-

rant.

"We goes to church right across from our home," she said. "I like to do a lot of Bible study..." she added.

Karen also competes in Special Olympics, including softball and the 50-yard dash.

Linda, one of Karen's house mates, said, "I always lock the doors." She and Karen said they think the living skills class has helped them to be able to live on their own.

Sheila, another student, used to live at home with her family, but she has moved to a group home. She said she has made friends there. She is able to ride the city transit bus and do some other things to help take care of herself. "It's fun," she said of the life skills class.

Another student, David, added, "I like to read the newspaper." David lives at home with his mother and works at Rose's Department Store.

Patti Russo, assistant teacher of the class, said Abdallah doesn't baby the students, but teaches them survival skills and to be responsible for their own actions.

Students majoring in occupational therapy from Winston-Salem State University and volunteers from the community also help with the class.

Cindy Bell, assistant professor of the department of occupational therapy at WSSU, said three students

from WSSU are spending three to four hours a week this semester assisting in the life skills class as part of their community field work. (Other WSSU students do their community field work at other locations, including the Enrichment Center and HOPE Inc., an HIV outreach program).

Joleen Jarvis, a WSSU student from St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, planned the God's eye project last Thursday. She said she enjoys working with people with developmental disabilities. "You just learn to love them," she said. People with developmental disabilities are human beings just like the rest of us. "They're going through things just like us."

Jarvis said that after she graduates from WSSU she plans to work in the United States for a few years before going back to the Virgin Islands.

Jimmy Jackson, another WSSU student, said he was a little uneasy at first about working with people with developmental disabilities but now he likes working with this population. He said that people with developmental disabilities are "just like regular people."

And WSSU student April Shackleford said, "They are just like me and you."

Roseann M. L'Esperance, volunteer coordinator for



Winston-Salem State University occupational therapy students Jimmy Jackson (left) and Joleen Jarvis (third from left) work with Linda and Dave on a craft project.

Group Homes of Forsyth Inc., said there are a lot of stereotypes about people with developmental disabilities, such as they are likely to commit crimes (fact is, they are more likely to be victims of crime rather than perpetrators, she said) or that they can't control their anger or they should be put in state institutions

because they aren't able to live in the community. But L'Esperance said that many people with developmental disabilities can learn survival skills.

She said that about 10,000 people in Forsyth and Stokes counties have some level of developmental disability. Of those, about 8,000 "are very mild and are fairly functional.

They (can) hold jobs in the community. They may even marry and live somewhat normal-looking lives."

"That leaves another 2,000 individuals who can live independently, as we're finding out, with support or in a group home setting or ... at home and their families care for them," L'Esperance said.

Study

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factors for leading causes of sickness and death.

Study subjects were 2,109 women who responded to questions about sexual assault in a 1997 CDC-funded Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, an ongoing household survey of people about their health and health-related behaviors.

Almost three-quarters of women reporting sexual assault either experienced or were threatened with forced intercourse, Martin said.

Sexual assault victims were more than twice as likely as other women to perceive their general health as being fair or poor, she said. They also were more than twice as likely as others to report having suffered poor physical and mental health in the previous month.

"It appears that a history

of sexual assault is predictive of a lot of other problems in women, including conditions that are important risk factors for cardiovascular disease," Martin said.

After controlling for economic and social factors and health-care coverage, victims of threatened or actual forced sexual intercourse were 100 percent more likely to smoke, 50 percent more likely to have high blood pressure and 70 percent more likely to be obese or have high cholesterol.

"Future research should determine whether screening for and identifying sexual victimization among women leads to effective interventions to help them successfully cope with these violent experiences," Martin said. "We also need to learn more about the timing of any ill health effects following assaults. From this data we couldn't determine if the

assaults occurred before or after the other health issues. Our feeling, however, is that they occurred before since younger women are the usual assault victims, while hypertension, obesity and high cholesterol tend to occur later in women's lives."

Because sexual abuse has been a taboo subject for so long, only recently have clinicians and others begun talking to women about that common issue, she said.

"We hope studies like ours will encourage doctors, nurses and other health-care providers to discuss this more often with patients and also incorporate the issue into their teaching of students," Martin said.

A limitation of the study was that it could not include women who did not have telephones, she said. For that reason, the one-in-five figure for sexual assault probably underrepresents the true incidence.

St. Jude

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hospital would be open to all at a time when such ideas weren't always popular."

St. Jude, one of the first integrated hospitals in the Mid-South region of the United States, treats patients regardless of their race, place of origin or ability to pay. The institution's first research grant was for the study of sickle cell disease, a genetic blood disorder that strikes one in every 350 African Americans and one in every 1,000 Hispanics. One in 12 African Americans carries the "genetic trait that can cause the disease.

Sick children have traveled from the Caribbean, Africa and Central and South America for treatment at St. Jude. The hospital publishes its findings in medical journals and freely disseminates its research breakthroughs to doctors, clinics and hospitals around the world so children who cannot travel to Memphis can benefit from its work. St. Jude physicians also make regular visits to 13 countries in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Central and South America to train and educate local doctors and nurses.

ALSAC/St. Jude will partner with churches, local civic organizations, fraternities and sororities, and other community groups to spread the word about the treatment options available at the hospital. They also will focus on the need for participation in medical research, with an emphasis on the hospital's leadership role in developing treatments and cures for diseases such as HIV/AIDS, sickle cell disease and leukemia.

Two staff members will lead the outreach effort: Deidre Malone, vice president of marketing services for ALSAC/St. Jude, and Judith Black, director of public relations for St. Jude.

Malone will direct ALSAC/St. Jude's efforts to reach a broader base of potential donors to the hospital. She will manage the multicultural marketing, corporate marketing, merchandise marketing, celebrity relations and marketing research and analysis departments for ALSAC/St. Jude. A member of the St. Jude staff since 1993, she is the former public relations director at St. Jude.

"We want people to know more about the good work taking place at St. Jude, and especially how different ethnic groups can benefit and con-

tribute to this life-saving work," Malone said. "St. Jude has had a long history of service to minority communities. We want people to know of our ongoing commitment to groundbreaking medical research that touches these groups."

Black will direct the hospital's efforts to reach minority communities through public and community relations, events and a physician referral program. She joined the St. Jude staff in July 2001, after serving as director of public relations and marketing for the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis.

"St. Jude has helped improve the quality of life for many children, including many children of color," Black said. "Most people know of our cutting-edge research and breakthroughs in pediatric cancer, but not as many are familiar with the tremendous strides St. Jude has made in HIV/AIDS and sickle cell disease research and treatment.

"Through this initiative, we want to increase the number of patients referred to us with these diseases. We also want to ensure that people in these two communities know about our research efforts and the many children of African and Hispanic descent that are in our care."

NOTICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION MEETING

Broad Street Improvement Project

The Winston-Salem Department of Transportation will hold a second public meeting, as shown below, for the proposed improvements to Broad Street between 6th and Cotton Streets.



Wednesday, April 10, 2002
4:00 to 6:00 p.m.
Forsyth County Central Library
Auditorium
660 W. 5th Street
Winston-Salem, NC 27101

The purpose of the meeting is to allow the Transportation Consultant and City staff to share their assessment of comments received from the first meeting, show the recommended design alternative and visual improvements and to receive your comments. All members of the public are invited to attend and participate.

The meeting will include an open house from 4:00-5:00 pm, with a formal presentation beginning at 5:00 p.m. Comments and questions will be taken after the presentation. Both W-S DOT staff and Consultant team members will be available during the entire meeting to discuss the project.

If you have any questions about the workshop, please contact Stan Polanis, Winston-Salem DOT, 336-727-2707 or stanp@ci.winston-salem.nc.us. For those needing special assistance to attend the workshop, please call Angela I. Carmon, City ADA Coordinator, 336-727-2056 or TDD 336-727-8319.

