

Vital Signs: Senate votes on sex ed and mental health parity bills

Shawn Doherty | Posted: Thursday, January 28, 2010 3:05 pm

Sex and mental illness.

They're probably two of the most ticklish subjects you can talk about when it comes to public health, but state Senators took both of them on today.

A bill that would require employers in the state to provide mental health parity passed the state Senate late this morning, and most observers expect the legislators will also vote to approve a sex education bill by the end of the afternoon.

Both bills have sparked intense public debate, which we've been following closely. Both come after years of lobbying for similar failed measures failed. Both tackle health issues that many people prefer not to talk about---mental illness and sex. And both seek to confront what have become public health crises in Wisconsin---inadequate treatment for the mentally ill and an epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases.

The [state mental health parity law](#) passed by the Senate in a bipartisan 20-13 vote would require most businesses in the state that offer mental health parity to provide those benefits at levels equal to benefits provided for other illnesses. The Assembly could vote on the measure as early as late February or March.

The state law would fill gaps left by the feds, who recently passed parity regulations that leave an estimated 700,000 Wisconsin residents uncovered. The Capital Times has written about several of these gaps, including a loophole that the [city of La Crosse](#) recently took advantage of that allows governments to simply "opt out" of the federal law and duck parity altogether. Those who have been tracking the law say that if and when it is passed La Crosse will need to back up and add parity to insurance plans for its 500-plus city employees.

The state law would not affect businesses that offer self-funded plans, however. So [Woodman's](#), the giant grocery retailer, has come under criticism since we wrote about the store's decision to drop mental health benefits completely rather than comply with the federal parity law, is off the hook.

Nor would the state law clarify the dispute over whether or not Wisconsin's own public insurance program, the [BadgerCare Plus Core plan](#) should offer mental health parity. Advocates for the mentally ill claim the state is currently violating federal law by not offering such parity. Small businesses complain it is unfair of the state to require them to comply parity laws when the state itself does not do so.

The sex bill would require any school districts that offer sex ed to offer students information about contraceptives rather than focusing only on abstinence, which is what some districts in Wisconsin currently do. Check out our [cover story](#) on the epidemic and what has become a fascinating public debate.