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STATE REPRESENTATIVE

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Wisconsin Mental Health and Substance Abuse Parity Act
Passes through Assembly Committee

Mental health and substance abuse parity increases access to vital treatment, awaits full consideration by the State Assembly

MADISON—Today, Assembly Bill 512—legislation authored by Representative Sandy Pasch (D-Whitefish Bay) and otherwise known as the *Wisconsin Mental Health and Substance Abuse Parity Act*—passed through the Assembly Committee on Health and Healthcare Reform.

“It is about time that we recognize treating mental illnesses and substance abuse is the right thing to do,” said Rep. Pasch, a psychiatric nurse. “I am glad that the committee took a strong stand in favor of this important proposal on behalf of individuals living with mental health and substance abuse disorders across the state.”

A bi-partisan group of over 40 legislators are co-sponsoring this important legislation that would close part of the mental health and substance abuse insurance parity gap in federal law by requiring all group health plans to provide mental health and substance abuse disorder coverage at the same level as medical and surgical coverage.

“The issue of mental illness and substance abuse knows no age, race, gender, economic status, or political party,” said Rep. Pasch. “Mental health and substance abuse parity will allow individuals living with mental illness to enjoy healthier lives and be more productive members of society—providing invaluable benefits to families, businesses, and local governments across the state.”

The costs of not treating mental illness and addiction to business through absenteeism, lost productivity, and disability and unemployed insurance claims are well documented. However, Rep. Pasch recognizes that many businesses across the state are struggling to make ends meet through the economic downturn. Therefore, she worked to provide protections for particularly vulnerable businesses in an amendment that provides flexibility for employers that experience a significant increase in costs due to parity or have fewer than 10 employees eligible for care through a group health benefit plan to opt out of the bill’s requirements.

“I firmly believe that all employers—small and large alike—will not only benefit from providing mental health and addiction parity, but that failing to effectively treat these illnesses will spread costs throughout their businesses,” said Rep. Pasch. “However, in order to address concerns that particularly vulnerable employers may be disproportionately burdened by this proposal, I provided the flexibility for many of them to exempt themselves from the legislation’s requirements.”

AB 512 now awaits full consideration by the State Assembly. The bill’s Senate companion—SB 362—awaits executive action in the Senate.

“The costs of not treating mental illness and substance abuse are too great to ignore,” said Rep. Pasch. “I look forward to continue to working with my colleagues to ensure that this important proposal moves swiftly through the legislative process.”

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