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# Senate passes mental health parity

by [Bob Hague](#) on January 29, 2010

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The state Senate has passed legislation requiring mental health coverage in employer provided health insurance. Debate revolved around potential costs and potential savings to small and medium sized Wisconsin employers, if group insurance plans are required to provide parity in health care coverage for treatment of mental illnesses and substance abuse.

“We’ve got to treat mental illness as a physical illness, which it is,” said the bill’s author, Senator Dave Hansen (D-Green Bay). “The stigma exists, and I think that stigma still being out there is killing people, and it’s just wrong. Can small business afford this? What are the costs of not treating mental illness and addiction?” Senator Judy Robson (D-Beloit) said businesses will save money in the long run. “This (mental illness or addiction) costs employers,” said Robson. “When you have employees that are not functioning up to their potential, or have many sick days, they drain the employer.”

“It’s a job killer, make no mistake about it,” argued Senator Dale Schultz (R-Richland Center). “This will make it harder for smaller employers to keep it together.” Employers with 50 or fewer employees and individual health plans are exempt from federal legislation passed in 2008, and the bill’s supporters argue it would close the gap for thousands of employees in Wisconsin. “This bill goes right to the Achilles heel, where it’s really going to hurt,” said Senator Mary Lazich. “This guy goes after the small guy. It goes after the small employer. It just takes a dagger to their incomes and to the economy in the state of Wisconsin.”

“I’m not sure why insurance companies through the years have decided that mental illness has certain restrictions on coverage,” Robson said. “We don’t do that for diabetes or heart disease.” Opponents also noted that the state’s new BadgerCare Basic coverage does not provide mental health or substance abuse coverage. The bill ([SB-362](#)) passed on a partisan 19-13 vote and now moves to the Assembly.

AUDIO: Bob Hague reports (1:15 MP3)