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# Authors defend mental health parity

by [Bob Hague](#) on [October 29, 2009](#)

in [Health & Medicine](#), [Politics & Government](#)

Authors of a bill requiring parity for insurance coverage of mental health treatment insist it's not a jobs killer. Right now, group health insurance plans in Wisconsin cap payments for mental health and substance abuse treatments at \$7,000.

While some small business groups oppose the parity bill, Senate author, Green Bay Democrat [Dave Hansen](#), says businesses would benefit from increased productivity and improved attendance: "the question should be, is early intervention, and investing money early on, in the end going to save you money?"

Bill Smith heads the Wisconsin Federation of Independent Businesses. "While mandates do enhance coverage, (and) some argue that they improve the quality of health care for a few, mandates do increase costs, and that cost . . . falls disproportionately on employees and small business employers," says Smith. Congress has approved a mental health parity bill which excludes small businesses with fewer than fifty employees. Smith says the Wisconsin bill would not include that exemption, and that would hurt his members.

"Vermont did quite extensive research, looking at what was the impact on small businesses," says state Representative [Sandy Pasch](#), a Whitefish Bay Democrat who's the bill's Assembly author. "It is negligible. In fact, if the rates went up at all, they couldn't really say it was related to any mental health, but they did report increased productivity (and) decreased absenteeism."

"We're continuing to see large increases in health insurance costs in the small business community," says Smith. "We continue to see employers reducing coverage where ever they can. And that's the key thing here: as people in Madison decide what kind of benefits small businesses should provide, it's really the workers who are going to carry that burden."

"A cost-benefit study would say that for every one dollar invested in mental health treatment, employers gained a return of at least a \$1.20, through increased productivity and attendance," says Hansen. Hansen says despite an earlier attempt to increase the \$7,000 cap, it's remained the same for twenty years. Pasch and Hansen testified before the Assembly Health Committee, which held a public hearing on the bill ([AB 512](#)) on

Wednesday.

*WIBA's John Colbert contributed to this report*

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