

Mental Health Parity Campaign Comes to Sacramento

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Sacramento, CA - In an effort to build support for mental health parity, Congresswoman Doris O. Matsui (CA-5), joined by Congressman Patrick Kennedy (RI-1), hosted a field hearing on access to mental health and addiction care in the United States. The hearing focused on the cost of leaving such prevalent diseases untreated – lives lost to suicide, in our criminal justice system, our economy, in our emergency rooms and even our health care costs – and the need for the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act, federal mental health parity legislation that grants access to addiction and mental health treatment. The Members heard a variety of voices on the issue during the hearing -- mental health and addiction experts, legislators, consumers, and a Superior Court Justice.

"Every single one of us has seen our lives touched by mental illness in one way or another. What we do here today is a step toward bringing the struggles of so many Americans into the light," Congresswoman Matsui stated on the importance of parity and the legislation. "In essence, I think that this is about the right of every patient to access the health care he or she needs in an affordable and equitable way.

Congresswoman Matsui has been a long-time advocate for mental health parity; working with Tipper Gore and Nancy Domenici in the Clinton Administration. She has continued that effort since being elected. She was a cosponsor of the legislative focus of the hearing – the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act – in the previous Congress. And when it is reintroduced next month, she will again co-sponsor the legislation. Fortunately, this Congress is expected to pass the legislation. Today's hearing will inform the efforts and bring the voices of Sacramentans – and individuals from across the country – to the Congressional debate over equal access to health care for mental health and addiction.

Even though 21st century science has dramatically improved our understanding of mental illnesses, barriers to treatment still exist. Beyond the stereotypes and stigma, the most significant roadblock to recovery is legally-permissible discrimination within insurance plans, which charge higher premiums and co-payments for mental health coverage than for physical ailments. Over 53 million Americans suffer from mental illness and a recent study showed that as many as 50% of Americans will face mental health issues during their lifetime. Untreated mental illness costs our economy over \$150 billion each year. According to the Wall Street Journal, untreated depression alone costs American businesses \$70 billion in lost productivity and employee absenteeism.

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