

FACES & VOICES OF RECOVERY

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CITIZEN ADVOCATES CALL ON INSURANCE COMPANIES TO FULLY IMPLEMENT MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION EQUITY ACT

*Congressional sponsors pleased by release of long-awaited regulations as important
step for people with addiction and their families*

(Washington, DC, January 29, 2010) – Citizen advocates hailed the federal government’s release of interim regulations to implement the Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act and called on all insurance companies to comply with the new regulations. “The regulations are out, and not a moment too soon,” said Stephen Gumbley, vice chair of the national recovery advocacy organization Faces & Voices of Recovery. “Some insurance companies have already put plans in place that fall short of this law’s intent, severely restricting patients’ access to life-saving care. This needs to change and we encourage individuals and families covered by these plans to ask them to fully implement policies consistent with this new law.”

The law, officially known as the Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 requires employer-sponsored health plans to cover addiction and mental illness on a comparable level with other health conditions. An estimated 100 million Americans and their families will benefit from equitable coverage for addiction and mental illness care under the law. Three federal agencies – the U.S. Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Treasury – were involved in writing the regulations that implement the law.

“I am extremely pleased The Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 is now effective for health care plans which began this year. The regulations released today provide the critical guidance necessary to ensure that this landmark legislation is implemented fairly and justly, and will ensure that insurance companies are no longer allowed to discriminate against those suffering from addiction and mental illness,” said Representative Patrick Kennedy (D-RI).

Kennedy and former Rep. Jim Ramstad (R-MN) were leaders in the bi-partisan, decade-long fight to unlock the door for people who have been denied adequate coverage.

According to Ramstad, “The next step is making sure that the American people know about their new rights and benefits and how to use them. We want to make sure that people get the care required under the law.”

Some companies such as United Healthcare and Blue Cross/Blue Shield, have created new plans that exclude some benefits that should be offered under the new regulations such as methadone maintenance treatment, discriminatory limits on outpatient treatments, and other addiction treatment services.

“In the absence of regulatory guidance, some insurance companies released plans which fall far short of what Congress intended,” said Gumbley. “Faces & Voices calls on Americans with private health insurance coverage from companies like United Healthcare and Blue Cross/Blue Shield to make sure that their plans comply with the new federal regulations.” Over 400 comments were reviewed by federal regulators while developing the interim regulations released today. “We believe that the regulations will provide excellent guidance for health plans and make critical services available that have been denied for far too long,” said Gumbley.

When people are treated for addiction, the costs associated with crime, accidents, absenteeism from work and other areas are all reduced. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, when savings related to health care are included, total savings can exceed treatment costs by a ratio of 12 to 1. “When people get the treatment they need and recover from addiction, expensive health care costs for emergency room visits and addiction-related illness will go down,” concluded Gumbley.

About Faces & Voices of Recovery

Faces & Voices of Recovery is working to mobilize, organize and rally the millions of people in recovery from addiction to alcohol and other drugs, their families, friends and allies in a campaign to end discrimination; broaden social understanding; and achieve a just response to addiction as a public health crisis. For more information, please visit: www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org.