

Wellstone son presses mental health bill

by AP-News

In a quest to overhaul mental health insurance as "a huge legacy for my dad," the son of the late Sen. Paul Wellstone is teaming with the son of Sen. Edward Kennedy (news, bio, voting record) — though the elder Kennedy has a different proposal in mind.

Wellstone's son, David Wellstone, is backing legislation by Rep. Patrick Kennedy (news, bio, voting record) that would require equal health insurance coverage for mental and physical illnesses when policies include both.

"This is an issue fundamentally of civil rights," Rep. Kennedy said at a House subcommittee hearing on his bill Friday — just before Father's Day.

Kennedy's father, Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., has a bill pending in the Senate that both sons say doesn't go far enough.

"I think the House bill would be a huge legacy for my dad," said Wellstone, 42. "I know he would be opposed to the Senate bill." Wellstone has made repeated trips to Washington to lobby members of Congress, hoping to win passage as a tribute to his father, a Minnesota Democrat who was killed in a plane crash in 2002.

The younger Kennedy, a Rhode Island Democrat who has battled depression, alcoholism and drug abuse, was diplomatic about the differences between his father and him on the legislation.

"Obviously, my father and I are trying to get the strongest bills through our respective chambers," he said in a telephone interview. "The House bill is stronger in that it lets the medical community define mental illnesses rather than the insurance community."

The elder Wellstone championed the issue known as mental health parity for years. His longtime ally, Sen. Pete Domenici (news, bio, voting record), R-N.M., along with Sens. Kennedy and Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., put forth the version pending in the Senate.

The trio of senators announced a compromise "breakthrough" bill this year that resulted from negotiations with businesses, the insurance industry and mental health advocates. Business and insurance groups had fought previous versions, arguing the legislation would drive up insurance costs.

The House version specifies that if a plan provides mental health benefits, then it must cover conditions provided by the health plan with the highest average enrollment of federal employees. The Senate bill does not have similar language.

Rep. Kennedy said he believes that his bill has had an impact.

"Our bill has brought the Senate bill together in a lot of ways," he said. "I don't think the Senate bill would go as far it does had it not been for our bill."

Kennedy worked with Republican Rep. Jim Ramstad (news, bio, voting record) of Minnesota, a recovering alcoholic, in crafting the legislation. Ramstad, Kennedy's Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor, also testified for the bill Friday.

Another House-Senate difference is that the Senate bill calls for pre-emption of state parity laws in treatment limitations and financial requirements.

"I'm opposed to that," said Kennedy, 39. "States have been very aggressive in going the extra mile. We don't want to see that usurped by our work. We want to see states be able to go further if they choose to."

In a statement, the elder Kennedy said his bill "unequivocally protects the mandated mental health conditions covered by each state parity law, including state medical management mandates and contractual arrangements."

"The Senate parity bill gives 82 million people the assurance that their mental health benefit will be treated the same as their medical/surgical benefit," he said. "It is a historic step forward in addressing the long-standing discrimination against mental health."

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, which Kennedy chairs, approved the bill earlier this year.

In 1996, Sens. Wellstone and Domenici won passage of a law banning plans that offer mental health coverage from setting lower annual and lifetime spending limits for mental treatments than for physical ailments. Both the House and Senate bills would build on that by adding things like co-payments, deductibles and treatment limitations.

The House bill, the "Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act," has 268 co-sponsors — more than 60 percent of the House membership. It's backed by groups such as the Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy and Action and the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

The Senate bill, with 51 co-sponsors (a little more than half the senators), isn't named for Wellstone, and David Wellstone said that's just as well.

"I wouldn't have wanted my dad's name on that Senate bill," he said.

But some of the national mental health advocacy groups are supporting the Senate version.

"It is a very strong bill that would end insurance discrimination against people with mental health illness and their families," said Andrew Sperling, a lobbyist for the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Peter Newbould, director of congressional and political affairs at the American Psychological Association, said the Senate bill is the better one "because it can pass."

"I don't buy that," said David Wellstone, echoing his father's trademark tenacity and passion. "We just have to work hard and not cave in."

The bills are S. 558 and H.R. 1424

By FREDERIC J. FROMMER, Associated Press Writer
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