

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Congress Expands Access to Mental Health/Substance Abuse Treatment

(Milwaukee/Madison, October 8, 2008) Mental Health America of Wisconsin (MHA) applauds the United States Congress for passage of legislation that will provide more equitable coverage of mental health and substance abuse disorders in private health insurance coverage. The bill, which was passed last week and signed by the President, requires that when businesses cover these disorders they do not impose more restrictive conditions on that coverage, such as higher co-pays or lower annual benefit amounts, than they require for other medical conditions.

“This bill clearly makes a statement that mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders are valid medical conditions that can be very effectively treated,” said Karen Handrich, President and CEO of MHA. “This bill says to people who experience these disorders that they are worthy of the same level of coverage that is provided to people who experience heart disease, diabetes and other chronic medical conditions,” Handrich added.

While there have long been concerns about the cost of requiring “parity” for mental health and substance abuse disorders, the recent experience of providing just such equal coverage in the Federal Employees Health Benefit Plan helped to dispel this myth. The Congressional Budget Office estimated that the law would increase premiums only two-tenths of one percent.

“This legislation tells me that employers have now come to recognize the value in providing adequate treatment for these disorders,” said Shel Gross, MHA’s Director of Public Policy. Both the business and insurance industries supported the legislation. “We know that for employers, mental health and substance abuse disorders are major causes of lost productivity, short term disability costs and long term disability costs. This legislation reflects an understanding that an investment in treatment will reap huge payoffs for businesses and for our society.”

The bill applies only to plans covering businesses of more than 50 employees. It does not require that they provide mental health and substance abuse coverage, but surveys have found that most large employers do routinely include this coverage in their benefit packages. MHA encourages employees to make sure they let their employers know that this coverage is important to them. The law will go into effect for most plans on Jan. 1, 2010.

MHA would like to thank the entire Wisconsin Congressional delegation, all of whom were supportive of this legislation.

MHA of Wisconsin is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting mental health, preventing mental disorders and achieving victory over mental illness through advocacy, education, information and support.

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