

# House Leaders Introduce Bill to End Insurance Discrimination Against Americans with Mental Health, Substance Use Needs

## **Protections Would Bring Fairness to Employer-Sponsored Insurance Coverage**

(March 7, 2007) - Leaders in the House of Representatives, with the support of a majority of House members, today introduced the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act (HR 1367) that would afford millions of Americans and their families coverage for mental health and substance abuse disorders - ending decades of discriminatory practices. Mental Health America commends the leadership and determination of Representatives Patrick Kennedy (D-R.I.) and Jim Ramstad (R-Minn.) in crafting this measure, which would offer insurance protections to the nearly 60 percent of Americans who rely on employer-sponsored coverage. Another 254 House members joined Kennedy and Ramstad as original cosponsors.

"This legislation would end the discrimination currently faced by millions of Americans by barring employers and health plans from imposing stricter limits on insurance coverage for mental health and substance abuse care than those set for other health problems," said David Shern, Ph.D., president and CEO of Mental Health America. "Enactment of a strong parity bill is the necessary first step in improving access to behavioral health care. It would move the nation one monumental step closer to the broader goal of addressing mental illnesses with the same urgency and priority attached to other illnesses."

The Wellstone Act would end such discriminatory insurance practices and create fairness in health insurance coverage. It would require health plans to include benefits for any mental health or substance abuse disorders covered by the Federal Employee Health Benefits (FEHB) plan option with the highest enrollment. FEHB has provided equitable mental health and general health care coverage to federal government employees since 2001. The legislation would build on important insurance protections established in 38 states across the

country. State parity laws vary widely from state to state (for a map of state laws, visit [www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/parity/states](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/parity/states)).

The legislation has gained momentum from powerful testimony at a series of community hearings across the nation - mounted by Reps. Kennedy and Ramstad and sponsored by Mental Health America and the National Alliance on Mental Illness to document the need for parity legislation. Nearly all Americans support parity, including 83 percent of Republicans, 92 percent of Democrats and both employees and managers (89 percent, respectively), as revealed in a recent [survey by Mental Health America](#).

"This issue is not about politics," said Shern. "It's about fairness."