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Senators Urge Drug Access

Pre-approving mental-health medication a bad idea, governor is told

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Columbus, OH—The Strickland administration’s plan to require pre-approval of mental-health drugs covered by Medicaid could save money now but cost more in the long run because of increased hospitalization and emergency-room expenses, an Ohio Senate panel was told yesterday.

Shortly after a hearing on the subject, all 11 members present of the Health, Human Services and Aging Committee, including three Democrats, took the unusual step of dashing off a letter urging Strickland to rescind the policy before it takes effect Jan. 1.

The chairman, Sen. Kevin Coughlin, and the other committee members said in the hand-delivered letter that the change will be “damaging to the Medicaid population who depend on life-saving mental health treatment.”

The Cuyahoga Falls Republican said he also will recommend to his fellow GOP members, who control the Senate, that they should attempt to override the governor’s veto. He acknowledged, however, that is unlikely.

Strickland spokesman Keith Dailey said the governor had not seen the letter. He said Strickland, a former prison psychologist, is familiar with the issues and would not make the change if he thought it would hamper access to needed therapeutic drugs.

The administration estimated the change will save \$20 million to \$47 million annually.

Strickland used his line-item veto to remove a budget provision that would have continued an administration practice in effect for several years under which mental-health drugs, including next-generation anti-psychotic medications, do not require preauthorization by a managed-care provider.

Mental-health advocates fear the pre-approval process, handled by any of nine managed-care plans, will be cumbersome, time-consuming and result in limiting patients’ access to drugs.

David Malawista, of the Athens Police Department, told the committee that making anti-psychotic drugs harder to get could inadvertently overwhelm the legal system.

“When something happens, we’re the people that have to deal with these things,” he said.

People with untreated mental illness often end up in hospitals where the cost can run as high as \$500 a day, he said.

Melissa Brown of Cincinnati, the mother of 6-year-old Max, who has bipolar and other mental-health issues, told legislators that the change comes just as she is applying for Medicaid coverage for her son's expensive drug treatment. Her private insurance paid part of the cost in the past.

Brown said Max "got his smile back" after beginning a new drug treatment that made a "life-changing impact" on his behavior, which had been unpredictable and violent.

"This is a day-to-day, minute-to-minute struggle," she told lawmakers. "Please don't make it any more difficult for me."

Dr. Steven W. Jewell, head of the Ohio Psychiatric Physicians Association, said that preauthorization would limit access to seven new drugs that are the "first line of treatment" for schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and other serious mental illnesses.

Cristal A. Thomas, who oversees the Medicaid program for the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, said mental-health drugs overall account for \$838 million in annual spending, 30 percent of the total Medicaid drug budget.

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