

By a vote of 263-171 on October 3, 2008, the House gave final approval to the Paul Wellstone-Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 as part of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act (HR 1424).

This victory in the House ends a nearly 20 year effort to require group health plans to cover treatment for mental illness on the same terms and conditions as all other illnesses. The tireless work of advocates from all over the nation that contacted their Senators and House members to push for this landmark legislation has been phenomenal.

The leadership of the sponsors of parity in Congress including Senators Pete Domenici (R-NM), Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), Mike Enzi (R-WY) and Christopher Dodd (D-CT) and Representatives Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) and Jim Ramstad (R-MN) was invaluable. The contributions of the late Senator Paul Wellstone (D-MN) in bringing parity forward should never be forgotten. After nearly 20 years, their efforts have resulted in mental illness treatment no longer being subject to 2nd class status in our health care system.

The parity law becomes effective 1-year after enactment of the bill. This will mean that group health plans will no longer be able to impose limits on inpatient days or outpatient visits or require higher deductibles or cost sharing for mental illness or addiction treatment that are not also applied to all other medical-surgical coverage.

There is a special effective date rule for collective bargaining agreements that would delay imposition of the parity requirements until the next collective bargaining contract goes into effect. The law requires that the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Treasury issue regulations within 1 year, although failure to issue such regulations will not delay the effective date of parity.

Mental health advocates must remain vigilant to insure that the forthcoming regulations governing this new law will be consistent with the intent of Congress to end discrimination in health coverage for those citizens suffering with mental illness and substance use disorders.