

Update On Legislation on The Hill . . .

Mental Health Parity

Knowing the House has never been strongly supportive of its Parity bill (HR 953) mental health organizations, including the Federation, have banked on the Senate's apparent commitment to the issue as the way to move the legislation to the President's desk. The Senate bill (S 486), with 68 cosponsors, more than enough for passage, is being held-up by Senate Majority Leader Frist (R-Tenn.) who refuses to schedule a floor vote.

On the horizon is the sunset of the 1996 legislation authorizing limited Parity. Frist is proposing, and the Senate Democrats have accepted, legislation that will reauthorize the 1996 legislation and require mental health parity when the employer offers mental health services. As part of the agreement, Frist will allow a floor vote, limit debate to one hour, and limit amendments to only one. Unfortunately the amendment that all anticipate will be put forward relates to a cap on premiums and allows business to opt out of participation if they anticipate their premiums will increase by one percent or more (a prospective view). The Federation and most mental health organizations in support of parity believe the opt out provision should not apply until a business can show that its premiums have actually increased by one percent or more (a retrospective view).

The floor vote, promised by Frist to occur early this year, could happen at any time. If it passes the Senate it will have to be amended onto other legislation making its way to the House as that body has no plans to address the legislation as a stand-alone bill. While the Senate has drafted language it has not yet introduced it as a bill or added it to other legislation as an amendment.

Patient's Bill of Rights, Medicare Reform, and Privacy Rule

The Patient's Bill of Rights (HR 597), Medicare Reform (S 646 / HR 1314), and the Privacy Rule (HR 1709) have not moved out of their respective House or Senate policy committees.

As you may be aware, at the Clinical Social Work Federation's Board meeting in May, members spent a "Day on the Hill" lobbying our representatives on the above legislative priorities. Their very successful efforts produced four additional cosponsors in the House for the Privacy Rule bill (with an additional House cosponsor as the result of a later district visit) and four Senators who are considering introducing the legislation in the Senate.

Our Board members saw more than 30 legislative representatives in that successful effort.

Funding The Government

In the last issue of the Notebook I informed you that budget negotiations were at a stand-still due to a demand by four Republican Senators that tax cuts and mandated spending carry with them funding offsets, a “pay-as-you-go” approach, so as to not increase the deficit. House Republicans strongly oppose the concept. Since the first of the year the fight has grown more heated with negotiations and parliamentary maneuvers failing to provide any of the parties with an advantage.

Returning from its holiday break, the House has scheduled action on spending bills every day for the next three weeks, after which they, and the Senate, will break for the summer and the Democratic and Republican conventions. They will return in early September for a month and then recess so as to be able to campaign throughout October.

Funding priorities for the House include foreign operations, military construction, and a variety of Departments. Republican staff is predicting that 11 of the 13 annual appropriations bills will be out of committee and out of the House by the end of the month. Absent from this list are appropriations for health, education, and labor.

The Senate will not be matching the House’s quick action on spending bills as it has not yet even developed a plan of action for addressing appropriation measures. Senate staff is now predicting that spending bills will not get addressed until the “lame duck” session following the elections. Veteran Congressional watchers are beginning to predict that this year will be a repeat of the last two and that no funding for the government, which has a fiscal year beginning each October, will be in place until the new Congress convenes in January.

What is important here is the increasing level of conflict and divisiveness that permeates virtually every aspect of the Congress making it exceedingly difficult to reach agreement on matters both great and small.

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