

Improve Access to Children’s Behavioral Health Care: Supporting Health Insurance Parity for Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Treatment

Issue

Access to mental health and substance use disorder health plan benefits is typically more restrictive than access to physical health benefits.

Background

- Federal parity law requires that commercial health plans, Medicaid managed care plans, and Children’s Health Insurance Plans that offer mental health and substance use disorder treatment benefits do so to the same extent they cover physical health care benefits.
- Insurance coverage for mental health and substance use disorders is typically more limited as compared to insurance coverage for physical health conditions.
- Most health plans are not in compliance with federal parity law requirements, as found in the recent Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act Annual Report to Congress.¹
- Psychiatrists typically receive lower in-network reimbursement than non-psychiatrist medical doctors for many of the same services.²
- A child’s mental health office visit is 10.1 times (1,000 percent) more likely to be out-of-network than a primary care office visit, and twice as likely as an adult mental health office visit.³

Solutions

- Public and private insurance programs should support children’s access to high quality and timely mental health care by covering the full range of evidence-based behavioral and developmental health care services, including care delivered via telemedicine, at parity with physical health care services and by adequately reimbursing physicians to provide that care.
- The federal government should support enforcement of federal and state parity laws.

¹ Department of Labor, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Treasury MHPEA Comparative Analysis Report to Congress (July 2023) [report-to-congress-2023-mhpaea-comparative-analysis.pdf \(dol.gov\)](https://www.dol.gov/eis/whysites/reports/2023-mhpaea-comparative-analysis.pdf).

² Milliman Research Report Addiction and Mental Health v. Physician Health: Widening Disparities in Network Use and Provider Reimbursement (Nov. 2019) [Addiction and mental health vs. physical health: Widening disparities in network use and provider reimbursement \(milliman.com\)](https://www.milliman.com/research/addiction-and-mental-health-v-physician-health).

³Ibid.