

Parity Law: Lessons Learned from California

A new article, published in the December 2009 issue of *Psychiatric Services*, examines experiences with implementing California's mental health parity law and discusses implications for the Federal Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008. SAMHSA's Jeffrey Buck, Ph.D., is one of the article's authors.

This act is designed to ensure that insurance plans offer mental health coverage as part of the overall health benefit packages and to eliminate disparities between the coverage for mental health and more traditional physical health conditions. (See *SAMHSA News*, November/December 2008, for information on the Federal parity law.)

CENTRAL FINDING

The report's central finding is that maximizing the effectiveness of these

parity efforts may depend heavily on educating the public about their insurance benefits.

The study in particular found that the lack of consumer knowledge of the parity law is a challenge. Nearly half of the consumer focus group participants indicated that they were not familiar with California's parity law even though more than three-quarters of them reported that they had a diagnosis covered by the law. Providers who participated in the focus group indicated that many consumers lacked understanding of their mental health benefits before and even after the law was put in place.

This study, conducted from September 2001 through January 2006, was geared to determine how effectively the parity law was adopted (in 2000) and what lessons from this experience could be

applied to the Federal parity law, which passed on October 3, 2008.

The study, "Implementation of Mental Health Parity: Lessons from California," not only identifies the importance of raising consumer awareness of parity, but also the need for increased oversight of performance of health plans in terms of issues such as access and equality.

The analysis is based on an extensive set of site visits, telephone interviews, and consumer and provider focus groups. A 14-person advisory panel reviewed the study design and analysis. The panel comprised California stakeholders and national experts.

Read *SAMHSA News* for continuing updates on the Federal parity law. To read the full text of the study, see *SAMHSA News* online, November/December 2009. ▴