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MENTAL HEALTH PARITY LEGISLATION PASSES HOUSE AND SENATE

SPAN USA Praises Members of the House and Senate for Passing Critical Legislation to Improve Mental Health Coverage

Washington, D.C. (September 24, 2008) . Today marks a victory for scores of mental health advocates and supporters with the passage of the Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 in both the House and the Senate. The bill was championed by lead sponsors U.S. Senators Ted Kennedy (D-MA), Pete Domenici (R-NM), and Mike Enzi (R-WY), Reps. Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) and Jim Ramstad (R-MN), as well as many supporters on both sides of Congress.

Providing equal access to mental health and substance use disorder care as is afforded to other health care is critical in suicide prevention efforts, and SPAN USA commends key policymakers for passing this critical legislation, said Brian Altman, Acting Chief Operating Officer of the Suicide Prevention Action Network USA. We join many suicide prevention advocates in urging Congress to pass the bill in the same form before the 110th Congress ends. Approximately one in four adults suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year, and more than 90 percent of adults and 60 percent of youth who die by suicide have a diagnosable mental health or substance abuse disorder.

The House and Senate have passed separate mental health parity bills over the last year before coming together with a policy compromise that would require health insurers that offer mental health insurance to provide benefits, co-payments and treatment limits equal to those for traditional medical coverage.

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This long-overdue legislation has brought mental illness and addiction out of the shadows and to the forefront of our work here in Congress, said Speaker Nancy Pelosi in a statement. By requiring that illness in the brain be treated just like illness anywhere else in the body for insurance purposes, we are helping to end discrimination against those who seek treatment for mental illness and saving lives.

History of the Mental Health Parity Bill

In March of this year, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act of 2007 (H.R. 1424). Altman attended a pre-passage rally with Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader Hoyer, and others. On June 18, 2008, House and Senate parity sponsors confirmed that all policy aspects of a House/Senate compromise bill have been worked out.

The policy compromise was included in H.R. 6893, which passed the U.S. House on September 23, 2008 by a vote of 376-47, and in the Baucus/Grassley amendment #5635 to H.R. 6049, which passed the U.S. Senate on the same day by a vote of 83-12. Because the bills to which the parity compromise is attached are different in form, more voting is necessary.

INTERVIEW OPPORTUNITY – To schedule an interview with Brian Altman, please contact Brooke Saltzer at (202) 715-1559 or brooke.saltzer@dittus.com.

About SPAN USA

SPAN USA is the nation's only suicide prevention organization dedicated to leveraging grassroots support among suicide survivors and others to advance public policies that prevent suicide. Since its founding in 1996, SPAN USA has led the drive to make suicide a public health priority by building political will and calling for the development and implementation of a national strategy for suicide prevention. Using its extensive grassroots network of survivors and advocates, SPAN USA has actively promoted the cause on Capitol Hill and in state legislatures. For more information, please visit www.spanusa.org.

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