

Senate plan could improve services for mental health



Posted 15 hours ago

RICHMOND — Virginia could strengthen mental health services for the uninsured by enacting a plan to accept federal funds designated for Medicaid expansion, advocates said Wednesday.

As a political war of words over Medicaid expansion escalated in the state Capitol, mental health advocates held a news conference to embrace a Senate plan that would use Medicaid expansion funds to help low-income Virginians purchase private health insurance.

The so-called “Marketplace Virginia” plan would pump \$1.2 billion into community mental health services over eight years and \$426 million into traditional psychiatric services, advocates said.

“This is a groundbreaking proposal with enormous significance,” said Mira Signer, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Virginia. “For the first time, there would be a payment source for adults needing basic mental health services and for those with serious mental illness. With these services, this population can avoid unnecessary emergency room visits and costly hospitalizations.”

Both houses of the General Assembly have made mental health a priority in this session, passing budget plans that would fund additional beds at state psychiatric hospitals, increase the number of therapeutic crisis assessment centers, and allow the state to extend the duration of emergency custody orders.

The mental health system has been under the microscope since the November death of state Sen. Creigh Deeds’ son. Gus Deeds shot himself the morning after Bath County authorities released him from emergency custody; he was released because mental health workers could not find a psychiatric bed for him before the emergency custody order expired.

Deeds has been leading the charge for mental health reforms in the General Assembly, introducing bills to improve the emergency intake system and launch a comprehensive study of mental health services.

Deeds said Wednesday that the Senate’s Medicaid proposal could pump another \$200 million a year into mental health services.

“That’s the ability in one fell swoop to have an enormous impact on mental health services,” Deeds said. “It’s huge.”

But the Republican-dominated House of Delegates remains adamantly opposed to any form of Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act, a position that GOP caucus leaders reinforced on Wednesday.

Republican delegates want the issue severed from negotiations on a new state budget, and warned that Democrats and Gov. Terry McAuliffe could jeopardize other spending priorities by holding out for Medicaid expansion.

Some House Republicans have also accused McAuliffe of resorting to threats in an effort to pry votes out of the GOP caucus.

“We are resolved to fight for the fiscally responsible route to take in this debate,” said Del. Todd Gilbert, R-Shenandoah County, said in a speech on the House floor. “We are not persuaded or going to be pushed off our position by emotional arguments, which so often form the core of the other side’s argument in these debates. We choose to take the fiscally responsible path because, if we do not, the taxpayers of Virginia will be on the hook for this broken system forever.”

The House and Senate appear nowhere near a compromise on Medicaid as the legislature approaches its scheduled March 8 adjournment. After meeting with House and Senate budget negotiators Wednesday afternoon, McAuliffe told reporters that he expects the budget dispute to drag the session into overtime.

“Obviously we have work to do to bring Virginia taxpayer money back to Virginia and close the coverage gap, and I think that’s probably going to take some time and some negotiations,” McAuliffe said.

In a separate statement, McAuliffe said he is encouraged that the House and Senate budget plans made mental health funding a priority. But, he added, “The greatest opportunity we have in investing in mental health reform is through accepting federal funds to close the coverage gap.”

Signer said mental health advocates appreciate the \$48 million mental health package the House incorporated into its budget proposal. But, she added, “It pales in comparison to what the Senate’s plan will accomplish.”

An estimated 77,000 uninsured adult Virginians suffer from mental illness, according to NAMI. About 40,000 of them have serious illnesses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

“There is no way Virginia can be successful in reforming its mental health system without addressing this enormous problem,” Signer said at the mental health advocates’ news conference.

Jennifer Miller of Fairfax related her experience trying to navigate the mental health system on a limited income.

Miller said she developed bipolar and post-traumatic stress disorder, could not work and lost her health insurance. She took a low-paying hourly job at a discount store to support herself and received emergency services through her local community services board.

She doesn’t qualify for Medicaid and can’t afford private insurance to help her better manage her illness.

“Being without health care coverage is scary,” Miller said. “It’s like you’re one step away from a crisis. Having a mental health crisis had a serious impact in my life and my ability to function and I don’t want to go through that again.”

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