



Expanding Treatment for Substance Use Disorders: Top Five Priorities for Advocates

The Affordable Care Act took an enormous step in the treatment of substance use disorders by including it as an Essential Health Benefit for all insurance policies purchased through Exchanges and for people newly eligible for Medicaid in 2014. Despite its inclusion in the new law, substance use disorder coverage and treatment still faces numerous obstacles. Below are five priorities to help focus the efforts of advocates.

1. Protect Medicaid

Many states face budget shortfalls and are looking for ways to trim their budgets. Treatment for substance use disorders and mental health paid by Medicaid may be a target. Medicaid cuts harm our most vulnerable populations by limiting access to treatments and reducing the quality of care.

2. Bolster enforcement of parity law

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) extends the [Wellstone/Domenici \(2008\) parity law](#) to new insurance plans giving many new patients access to services for substance use disorders and mental illness. The parity law requires that medical and mental health benefits be covered equally. There have been many consumer complaints about gaps in enforcement of the parity law.

3. Define Essential Health Benefit requirements

Health reform requires that benefits for people with substance use disorders be included in the essential health benefit package, which will form the basis of services covered by Exchange plans and new Medicaid plans. However, how those benefits are defined has yet to be determined on both federal and state levels.

4. Integrate substance use disorder services as changes are made to the way health care is paid for and provided

Ensure these services – including screening, inpatient and outpatient services, social work services, and prescription drug therapy – are included as policymakers devise new ways to deliver and pay for care.

5. Protect and strengthen the safety net (beyond Medicaid)

Community health centers, hospitals and public clinics can be important sources of services for substance use disorders. Since not everyone will be insured, even after the ACA is fully implemented, these services will continue to be important.