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Mental health parity law only the beginning, advocates say

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Challenges and barriers remain to providing mental health care despite passage of state and federal laws mandating health insurance coverage be equal to other types of treatment.

About 60 health professionals, consumers and government officials met Friday at the La Crosse Center on ways to improve access to mental health and substance abuse services now that Gov. Jim Doyle has signed a mental health parity law.

"It's going to be the start of a lot of things we will have to do," said

state Rep. Sandy Pasch, D-Whitefish Bay, who sponsored the bill in the Assembly.

One problem is that state spending on mental health is skewed toward institutions, rather than community-based treatment, La Crosse County Human Services Director Jerry Huber said.

In addition, hospitals statewide are reducing inpatient psychiatric services.

Mental health "is not a good product line. You just don't get a lot of money," Pasch said.

Several mental health professionals complained that licensing problems put up barriers to getting new psychotherapists and others in the field.

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse sociology professor Bill Zollweg, who worked with the county to establish a drug court that emphasizes treatment, said researchers are starting to view addiction as a brain injury.

Drinking and drug use causes brain damage that impedes the flow of dopamine, the neurotransmitter associated with happiness.

If the person stops using drugs or alcohol, Zollweg said, the brain can heal itself within eight to nine months. This approach could emphasize that addiction is a medical issue, he said, rather than a moral failing.

Tim Fuhrmann, a Gundersen Lutheran therapist in Monroe County, said getting clients to counseling is a major problem in rural areas.

"I have patients coming in from a 60-mile radius in all directions to seek treatment," he said. "I've had clients cancel or no-show because they did not have the funds or gas to arrive at our clinic."

He said federal law also limits the ability of some credentialed therapists to see patients without a physician in the building.

This session was the fifth of eight scheduled throughout the state. Recommendations will be forwarded to a statewide meeting in Madison.