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Mental health care forum to focus on parity

By Keith Uhlig • Wausau Daily Herald • March 2, 2010

Mental health and substance abuse problems deserve the same level of treatment as physical ailments, advocates say, but significant hurdles remain before they gain equal footing.

Those working to increase access to mental health and addiction treatment in central Wisconsin hope to begin crossing some of those hurdles -- or at least identify them -- in a Friday symposium at Northcentral Technical College in Wausau.

Sponsored by the Community Advocates Public Policy Institute, the meeting will outline legislative efforts to bring addiction and mental health treatment into line with medical treatment and spotlight the costs of failing to meet that goal.

That cost is high, says Wausau Police Chief Jeff Hardel, who will sit on a panel with local mental health care experts at the meeting.

"Law enforcement sees addiction in so many different areas of their work," Hardel said. "I would say that at least 70 percent of everything officers deal with is due to some kind of chemical abuse, alcohol abuse, drug abuse. ... We're seeing abuse on a daily basis."

A federal law was passed in 2008 that requires large employers and health insurance plans to provide equal treatment coverage for mental health issues. And a state law is working its way through the Legislature that would expand the scope of that law.

But even if people can get health insurance coverage for mental health and addiction problems, there's still a shortage of health care providers who can treat them, said David Riemer, director of Community Advocates. Riemer said parity meetings are meant to find ways to improve the system as a whole.

"We want to make sure there's enough providers," Riemer said.

Dr. Ed Krall, a psychiatrist with the Marshfield Clinic Behavioral Health Department and medical director for Security Health Plan, the health insurance arm of the Marshfield Clinic, said the parity laws will not improve access "at this point." Slashed budgets at the state and county level mean that public mental health treatment centers are seeing less money. And the economy is pinching private providers, too.

While there are no easy answers to those problems, meetings such as Friday's "Making Parity Real" allow state lawmakers to get a handle on the scope of the problem, Krall said.

"I think this discussion is very important," he said.

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