

US now requiring equal mental health coverage (Update)

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Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius listens from the audience before announcing easier access to mental health care during Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter's 29th annual mental health policy symposium at the Carter Center on Friday, Nov. 8, 2013, in Atlanta. (AP Photo/David Tulis)

A new Obama administration rule requires insurers to cover treatment for mental health and substance abuse no differently than they do for physical illnesses.

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius says nearly 60 percent of people with mental health conditions and nearly 90 percent with substance abuse disorders don't receive the treatment they need.

"For way too long, the health care system has openly discriminated against Americans with behavioral health problems," Sebelius said in a telephone conference call with reporters. "We are finally closing these gaps in coverage."

Sebelius said the rule should put an end to discrimination faced by some mental health patients through higher costs or stricter limits on

hospital stays or visits to the doctor.

The rule puts into effect legislation signed into law five years ago. Mental health parity also is required under the Obama administration's health care overhaul, the Affordable Care Act. Officials at America's Health Insurance Plans, a trade group, said they were still reviewing the new rule.

The administration had pledged to issue a final mental health parity rule as part of its effort to reduce gun violence—which was inspired by last year's deadly school shooting in Connecticut that left 20 young children and six adults dead.



Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, left, helps former First Lady Rosalynn Carter down the stairs after announcing easier access to mental health care during an address to the 29th annual mental health policy symposium at the Carter Center on Friday, Nov. 8, 2013, in Atlanta. (AP Photo/David Tulis)

Gil Kerlikowske, director of the National Drug Control Policy Office at the White House, said the new rule builds on the need to treat drug problems as a public health issue and not just as a criminal

justice issue. He said about 23 million Americans have a substance abuse disorder, but only about one in 10 get the treatment they need.

"Access to drug treatment shouldn't be a privilege to a few who can afford it," Kerlikowske said.

Lawmakers instrumental in passing the health parity law had grown impatient with how long it was taking to fully implement it.

Former Rep. Patrick Kennedy went public about his own struggle with addiction after crashing his car into a barricade near the Capitol in 2006; he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder after winning election to Congress in 1994.

"Ending insurance discrimination against pre-existing conditions is the single biggest mental health bill we could get," Kennedy said.

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