

THE
CARTER CENTER



29 July 2008

Dear Harry and Mitch,

We are writing to express our strong support for mental health and addiction parity legislation and ask the Senate to pass this life-saving legislation as part of the *Jobs, Energy, Families and Disaster Relief Act of 2008* (S. 3335) before the August congressional recess.

For more than two decades we have witnessed the ravages of mental illness and addiction and been blessed to see the development of effective treatments for these brain diseases. But the joy and exhilaration of these medical and psychosocial advances has always been mitigated by the frustration of their limited availability. Too few people receive treatment because they are arbitrarily denied by discriminatory insurance rules. Because we have seen the transformative effect high-quality treatments can have on the lives of people who have mental and substance use disorders and their families, we have enthusiastically joined a group of courageous legislators in their efforts to end this discrimination by enacting legislation.


We applaud Congressional negotiators for reconciling bipartisan, bicameral bills—the Senate’s *Mental Health Parity Act of 2007* and the House’s *Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act*--an effort that began in 1996 when the first mental health parity bill was passed. It is time to pass this legislation.

When our private health care system denies people coverage, the costs and burden are shifted to the public sector and our economy. According to a recent study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, major mental disorders cost the nation at least \$193 billion annually in lost earnings alone. The annual cost of alcohol and drug problems in the United States is more than \$400 billion, according to a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation study. An investment in our nation’s health will yield immeasurable returns for all of us and save billions in the long term.

The value and urgency of this law are undeniable, and the stakes are high. Last year, Americans affected by addiction and mental illness testified before Congress about how, even with health insurance, they were denied coverage for mental illness and addiction as they waited in overflowing emergency rooms. They shared profound heartache in their stories about those who had died after being denied coverage for these conditions.

Congress has taken the monumental step of formulating comprehensive bipartisan legislation. We ask the Senate to pass federal mental health and addiction legislation before the August congressional recess. We cannot wait any longer to make this investment in our nation’s health and future.

Sincerely,

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-221 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-230 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20510

CC: All United States Senators