

CQ Transcript
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PROMO

MENTAL HEALTH PARITY: Chambers pass financial bailout legislation that includes mental health parity bill.

CONTINUING RESOLUTION: President Bush signs stopgap bill to keep government running.

VETERANS HEALTH CARE: Sweeping package of veterans' bills includes measures to improve veterans health care.

INTRO

The House and Senate have approved a financial bailout package that includes a mental health parity bill. President Bush has signed into law legislation to keep the government running through March 6, 2009, while Congress has cleared several bills dealing with veterans' health care and other health related matters.

MENTAL HEALTH PARITY

Question 1: Congress has approved legislation dealing with mental health parity. Could you give us the details?

Answer: As part of a financial bailout package, Congress approved legislation that would require health insurers that cover mental health treatment to provide benefits, co-payments and treatment limits equal to those for physical ailments. The mental health parity bill, as you note, was included in a larger package of economic recovery legislation aimed at bringing more stability to the nation's financial markets. The bill also includes a series of "tax extenders" that would renew expiring tax breaks. The Senate approved the package by a vote of 74-25 while the House voted 263 to 171 to approve the bill.

Question 2: Both chambers considered the bill more than once before they finally passed it. How did that play out?

Answer: There was absolutely quite a bit of back-and-forth action on this measure, which has been before Congress for nearly a decade. The most recent round of action began in September 2007 when the Senate passed its mental health parity measure and the House passed its version in March. The two were blended over the summer, but how to pay for the bill became the issue. The House moved mental health parity legislation as a stand-

alone measure late last month, with the Senate including its version of mental health parity as part of legislation to extend expiring tax breaks. Then the Senate added mental health parity to its version of the financial bailout package – which also included the tax language -- which then passed the House.

Question 3: Why did the Senate include mental health parity as part of a bill dealing with the financial sector and tax provisions?

Answer: Due to the ongoing difficulties in the financial markets and the pressure to extend expiring tax provisions such as relief from the alternative minimum tax, including the parity provisions in that bill created additional pressure to move the entire package. The parity measure has widespread, bi-partisan support in both chambers as well as within the mental health community and among business groups so those alliances also work to overcome opposition to the financial bail-out package.

CONTINUING RESOLUTION

Question 3: Congress approved and President Bush signed into law a continuing resolution to fund the government for the next few months, including funding for health care programs. Could you recap that for us?

Answer: The measure will keep the government, with some exceptions, funded through March 6 at fiscal 2008 levels. Congress did not clear any of the 12 regular appropriations bills for fiscal 2009, which began Oct. 1. So the continuing resolution, or CR, will fund agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), whose appropriations bill was not completed, at current fiscal 2008 levels. Included in the package is full-year fiscal 2009 funding for military construction and the departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security.

Question 4: Was that expected?

Answer: It was. Democrats and the president have clashed over spending priorities for much of the last two years, and now those debates will wait until the next administration and the next Congress take office in January.

Question 5: An economic stimulus package was also in play. What happened there?

Answer: While the House passed a \$60.8 billion economic stimulus package that was designed to pump money into infrastructure projects, unemployment insurance and Medicaid, a similar measure failed to advance in the Senate. The White House had threatened a veto of both proposals, saying that the bills would do little to provide either a short-term stimulus or long-term growth.

Question 6: What would the bill have done for Medicaid?

Answer: It would have boosted matching payments to state Medicaid programs by \$19.6 billion over 15 months. Democrats had argued that the Medicaid funds were necessary to help cash-strapped states avoid making cuts to health insurance and health care services for low-income children and families.

VETERANS HEALTH CARE

Question 7: As part of their work before leaving town to campaign for the fall elections, lawmakers also passed several bills relating to veterans health care. What were they?

Answer: The legislation included a measure to authorize \$1.9 billion for Veterans Administration (VA) medical facility projects and major medical facility leases around the country. Another \$30 million was authorized for the VA to designate between four and six health care facilities as locations for epilepsy centers and to designate an individual in the Veterans Health Administration as a national coordinator for VHA epilepsy programs. Eight million in funding was authorized through fiscal 2012 for the VA to carry out research into PTSD through the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and another \$3 million was authorized for a two-year VA pilot program to test the feasibility and advisability of providing assessment, education and treatment of substance abuse via the Internet.

Question 8: Congress also approved a measure dealing with community health centers. Could you tell us about that bill?

Answer: Both chambers approved the legislation, which would renew funding for community health centers, which are clinics that provide preventative and primary health care to low-income people and the uninsured. The bill would authorize \$13.1 billion for the centers through fiscal 2012, which was roughly the level of funding authorized by a bill the Senate passed July 21. The original House bill, sponsored by Rep. Gene Green, D-Tex, would have authorized about \$1 billion more in funding.

Question 9: What other measures did Congress clear for the president's signature?

Answer: One would allow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to create a registry of people suffering from the condition known as Lou Gehrig's disease, while another would reauthorize federal support for community poison control centers. Both chambers also cleared legislation that would reauthorize a grant program for mental health treatment of prison inmates as well as a separate bill to authorize the director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences to make grants for the development and operation of research centers regarding environmental factors that may influence breast cancer. Still another bill authorized \$45 million extra to pay Medicare premiums for low-income seniors.