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## Health care system should address addiction

ANNE VANCE • JUNE 11, 2009 12:15 AM

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It may seem strange to suggest that the most urgent health issue facing us today is mental health and addiction legislation, and how that legislation is written in terms of regulating the parity law for addiction treatment.

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When the law goes into effect in October, group health plans that offer coverage will be required to provide the same coverage as they do for medical and surgical procedures. The agency responsible for this has called for clarification, definitions and information from the "field." This can and will affect hundreds of thousands of lives in this nation.

Last October, the House and Senate each passed this final bill, but there are very significant differences in the approach of each of those legislative bodies.

### House version

The House version was supported by the addiction field and the Senate versions by the mental health, employers and insurance fields. And so this responsible agency is looking for a compromise and "specifics," as well as clarity.

Those "specifics" I mentioned in the two approaches are varied, multiple and interesting.

Full of interpretations of what addiction is — who should decide on the form of treatment; medical necessity; maybe outpatient (fail first); then maybe inpatient; how long that should be; who pays what; how much — goes on and on.

Unfortunately, we are not clones — nor are the general addiction and health needs identical.

We need legislation that understands that, legislation that allows competent professionals in health care and treatment to make those decisions as they relate to individuals.

### Affecting life

Certainly addiction affects your behavior and your job, your standard of living, and the attitude of people around you that could help, but this should not affect your ability to get treatment.

This is about affordability and availability. If I asked the great majority of the population to reach out for ten, fifteen or twenty thousand dollars, do you think they could do it easily?

Here is Pavillon, a nonprofit, helping everyone we can with scholarships, financial aid, partial underwriting and working with individuals' insurances so that the patients who are insured can be reimbursed if there is

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## Many benefits

The benefits of appropriate treatment far outweigh its lack — some sevenfold. The costs to society that come in the form of hospital time, emergency room visits, outpatient and home care, the cost of injury and health deterioration, unemployment and poverty benefits, as well as the accidents and crime associated with abnormal behavior are huge.

And that doesn't even consider the costs in the lives of the men, women and children who live with the consequences of addiction.

The alumni of Pavillon know firsthand more about this disease, the emotional and career cost it has for individuals and their families, what treatment is and how it works, and what life-change really means.

The recent N.C. Medical Association's issue of Faces and Voices of Recovery calls for "the public and private insurance industry to provide access to coverage equivalent to other medical conditions."

## Let them know

In other words, we need a health care system that fully addresses the needs of those with addictive diseases.

I am going to ask you to take the time to write to your senator and congressman. Tell them what you think and what you want. Let us get some personal expertise into this legislation about our healthcare future.

And let us get it on track and going, now.

Anne Vance is CEO of Pavillon, a residential and outpatient substance abuse treatment center in Polk County. It is non—profit and accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities. As a Fellow with the American College of Healthcare Executives, Ms. Vance's career in the field of substance use disorders spans three decades.



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