



## Congressmen push for better access to addiction treatment

U.S. Rep. Jim Ramstad, a Republican from Minnesota, knows firsthand the power of alcoholism and drug addiction. He is a grateful recovering alcoholic, sober for the past 22 years, who is very passionate when speaking about a disease that could have cost him his life. He counts himself among the lucky ones who got the treatment and help he needed.

But millions of people are not getting the treatment required to arrest the chronic disease of alcoholism, he says. That's why he, along with U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman of Minnesota, are cosponsors of a new substance abuse treatment parity bill called the HEART Act--"Help Expand Access to Treatment and Recovery." They introduced the bill to Congress in late May.

"This is literally a life-or-death issue for 16 million Americans who are chemically dependent, covered by insurance, but unable to access adequate treatment," Ramstad said.

If enacted, the HEART Act would improve consumer access to addiction treatment by reducing discriminatory limits on coverage in private health insurance plans. It would provide parity in addiction treatment benefits, meaning a group health plan could not impose discriminatory annual/lifetime dollar limits, copays and deductibles, or day and visit limits unless similar limitations or requirements are imposed for other medical and surgical benefits.

Addiction to alcohol and other drugs is responsible for killing 150,000 people a year, costs \$246 billion a year in health care costs and lost productivity, and is America's No. 1 health problem, Ramstad said. Premiums for health insurance to cover addiction would increase by less than one half of 1 percent, he added. "And I can show you 20 studies that document that treatment works and is cost-effective.

"Congress must get real about the problem of addiction in America," Ramstad continued. "It's long past time to address the No. 1 public health problem facing our nation--the problem of chemical addiction."

Coleman replaces the late Sen. Paul Wellstone as a sponsor of this legislation and is the first Republican U.S. Senator to champion substance abuse parity. Ramstad and Wellstone had teamed in a push for parity for seven years before Wellstone was killed in a plane crash on Oct. 25, 2002. Ramstad and Coleman rallied support for the bill at a news conference in St. Paul on May 29.

"It feels good to be a part of this team," said Coleman. "I'm proud to stand in the shadow of Paul Wellstone on this important legislation."

Coleman pledged to work hard to pass the legislation, saying that the bill is a matter of "fundamental fairness, of ending discrimination and unleashing a wealth of opportunity." He called addiction an issue everyone has a stake in--a health issue, a social-justice issue, an economic issue, a community-building issue. And it is a personal issue, he added. "I don't know if any family can say they don't have a family member or loved one who hasn't been saved or lost to this disease."

Added Coleman: "Minnesota gets it. We've led the way; we're the birthplace of effective models of care. The fact is treatment works and saves lives."

William C. Moyers, vice president of External Affairs at Hazelden, counts himself among the fortunate ones. He got treatment and has been sober since 1994.

"We are the lucky ones--the ones who got well," Moyers said at the news conference. "And it is our responsibility to change the terms of the debate. We're not doing this for Hazelden, other treatment centers, or for those of us in recovery. We push forward for those out there still suffering. It is you who



must get behind this legislation--the treatment centers, people in recovery, all who advocate for this cause. We must rally around this legislation. We must carry the message to people in our community."

Despite an uphill battle for parity during the last seven years, Ramstad feels the chances for passage are improving. "First of all, we have a president who gets it," he said. "President Bush has allocated \$600 million more to treatment than has been spent in the past. And this president already supports mental health parity, and we believe the two--mental health and addiction--are intertwined."

Coleman added that a mental health parity bill, with bipartisan leadership, is primed for passage. "Once we get mental health parity passed, addiction should follow."

Ramstad said a friend of his recently pointed out that the Civil Rights Act was proposed in 1944 and didn't become law until 1964. "Let's hope it doesn't take 20 years to end discrimination against people with addiction. We must persevere; we must redouble our efforts. It's not going to happen without a concentrated, national effort."

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Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](#) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).