

## Autism therapy bill stalls in Alabama Senate

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By KIM CHANDLER and ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE

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MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) - Alabama's House unanimously approved requiring health insurers to cover an expensive autism therapy, but the legislation has stalled in the state Senate, where some senators are raising cost concerns.

The House voted 100-0 last month to mandate coverage of applied behavioral analysis therapy, also called ABA therapy. But the bill won't get a public hearing in the Senate until next week and the legislative clock is rapidly winding down, with lawmakers hoping to conclude the session on May 18.

The slowdown frustrates parents of children on the autism spectrum who have lobbied to change how they're insured. The Autism Society of Alabama says Alabama is one of only five states that do not require the coverage.

"We are very frustrated and concerned that the clock will run out and these families will be left without help," said Catey Hall of Birmingham, whose son is on the autism spectrum.

ABA is an individualized and intense form of therapy. Children can require 20 or more hours of it a week, but the experience can be life-changing, some parents say. The therapy can cost families thousands of dollars each month, putting it out of financial reach for many, if not most.

Hall said it worked wonders with her son, who went from not talking to being able to verbalize his needs as he heads into kindergarten. He'll likely start school in a regular classroom, she said.

Sen. Cam Ward supports the bill, and is worried it will die for the session if it doesn't pass committee by May 10.

Ward's daughter, Riley, had the therapy when she was a younger. Now 14, she plans to speak to senators about what it meant to her.

"Forty-five other states have this and I've yet to see anyone financially collapse," Ward said.

Because the mandate would impact state-funded insurance programs such as Medicaid, the bill is in the Senate Finance and Taxation General Fund Committee, whose chairman, Sen. Trip Pittman, said the bill would get a public hearing sometime next week.

"The costs do play a factor when you have to balance a budget," said Sen. Trip Pittman, the committee chairman. "The question is how much does it really cost?"

Blue Cross of Alabama, the state's dominant insurance company, said that as written, the mandate would be the nation's most liberal in terms of autism benefits, and would create costs resulting in higher premiums. The company estimated those costs at between \$48.8 million and \$97.7 million each year overall.

House members added some limits - a trigger to drop the coverage if it

causes more than a 1 percent rise in premiums, and yearly coverage caps, such as \$40,000 for children under age 9.

Koko Mackin, a Blue Cross spokeswoman, said the coverage caps "may be well intended, but they are unenforceable and in contradiction to federal law" regarding mental health parity.

"This bill remains an expensive mandate on both public and private health plans and it lacks accurate information on the costs imposed on Alabama businesses and their employees who will ultimately be the ones to pay for this new government-mandated benefit," said Billy Canary, president of the Business Council of Alabama, in a statement.

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