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Capital Notebook

Autism therapy bill to get committee vote April 12

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MONTGOMERY — A bill requiring insurance companies to cover an expensive therapy for autistic children will get a committee vote April 12, the chair of the House Insurance Committee said Friday.

Alabama is one of five states where applied behavior analysis therapy isn't covered by most insurance, according to lawmakers and advocates. House Bill 284, sponsored by Rep. Jim Patterson, R-Meridianville, would change that.

But business groups spoke against the bill at a public hearing last month and said it is too broad and doesn't set any age limits for the therapy or spending caps.

"I don't support the bill as it's written; it has no limits on it whatsoever," said committee chairman Rep. Kerry Rich, R-Albertville. "But at the same time, I understand that people have autistic children and feel like they need help. I believe they need help, but there needs to be reasonable limits."

Patterson said, despite opposition, the public is on the side of the legislation. He said he thinks he has the votes to pass it.

"I'd hate to be someone who votes against this and goes home," Patterson said.

At the public hearing, parents begged for help paying for the therapy they say can change a child's life. Some said they had wiped out their savings paying for it out of pocket and were considering

moving to a state where it is covered by insurance.

Opponents of the bill said the state shouldn't determine what insurance benefits employers have to offer.

DUI lookback bill

Ten-year-old misdemeanor drunken driving convictions and any felony previous DUI convictions could be considered when sentencing offenders under a bill in the Alabama Senate.

The state's current five-year lookback on DUI offenses is the minimum allowed in order to still receive federal road money.

"We need to send a message that this is serious business," Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, said last week. He's the sponsor of Senate Bill 180.

The Legislature in 2005 eliminated a lifetime lookback. Since then, the state has allowed for more pretrial diversion programs Orr says essentially give drunken drivers a first offense that isn't considered a DUI conviction.

The bill cleared the Senate Transportation and Energy Committee last month. It originally also targeted "drugged driving," setting legal standards on how much of some specific drugs a person must have in his or her system to be considered intoxicated. The bill met resistance, questions in committee and was substituted for a version that focuses on the lookback.

The bill also says that anyone who has a previous felony DUI conviction and receives another conviction will be guilty of a Class C felony, punishable with a fine between \$4,000 and \$10,000 and one to 10 years in prison.

Bill Lindsey, of the Alabama Office of Prosecution Services, said studies show about one-third of DUI offenders have previous convictions.

"I think 10 years is reasonable," Lindsey said. "I think society as a whole doesn't want to hold a DUI against someone for their lifetime, but five years is not enough."

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 23 states have 10-year lookbacks and a few have lifetime. About a dozen states have the same five-year period as Alabama.