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Alabama Senate prepares to take up autism bill

Troy Turner | Editor

Opelika-Auburn News

tturner@oanow.com

May 16, 2017 Updated May 16, 2017



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Lt. Gov. Kay Ivey presides over the Senate chamber during an earlier session at the Alabama Statehouse in Montgomery.

A bill that would require insurance coverage for therapy that could help children with autism returns to the spotlight Wednesday in front of the Alabama Senate.

"It'll be on the Senate floor Wednesday morning," said State Sen. Tom Whatley.

Whatley, who represents portions of Lee, Tallapoosa and Russell counties, is sponsoring Senate Bill 406 after the Alabama House passed a similar measure by a 100-0 vote.

Alabama is one of only five states that do not require insurance coverage for the therapy, which is the most commonly prescribed treatment for autism disorders.

Supporters say the therapy is critical to enhancing the lifestyles of children and families dealing with autism and giving autistic children a better chance for a productive life. Others also argue that the financial cost of the therapy is more beneficial than paying more in later years through social services to help provide more-extensive health care.

Opponents, however, argue that the measure would add to the already heavy fiscal burden facing the state's health care system and could punish businesses and insurance companies in what amounts to a tax.

"There's a substitute bill we'll probably adopt," Whatley said Monday in a meeting at the Opelika-Auburn News. "I'm expecting amendments to be made." But the senator fully expects the Senate will pass a measure requiring the coverage, and one that the House and governor will approve and pass into law.

Among items for debate are the timing for implementation, and how long insurance companies might need to adjust; along with calls for an age cap for the treatment, something Whatley argues could be counterproductive.

"Some say the age cap should be 16, some 19, and some say no cap, which I favor," he said. "I can't support anything less than 25 years old, and I prefer no cap.

"Don't tell me that this therapy can't help an adult in some form or fashion," Whatley said, and if an adult were to need it and not get it, "there is a cost that's going to be out there to take care of this person."

Applied Behavior Analysis therapy is a proven treatment for helping many children and adults learn workplace and societal skills that can help them live more independently, he argued, naming two local acquaintances he knows who have overcome autism challenges and are living more normal lifestyles.

Insurance companies have opposed the move, calling it too costly, and Senate Majority Leader Greg Reed is among those who have raised questions.

"This is an issue important to the people of Alabama and important certainly to those families (of autistic children), but it's also important to industry because the treatment of these conditions for these children can be extraordinarily expensive," Reed, R-Jasper, was quoted as saying at a recent meeting of the Business Council of Alabama.

If the Senate approves an amended bill, it would return to the House for approval of any changes from its own previously approved bill, and a final version approved by both chambers would go to Gov. Kay Ivey for her signature, which if given would make the measure law.



Troy Turner

Troy Turner is editor of the Opelika-Auburn News. He previously served as the news editor of a national news team in New York City for the nation's second largest newspaper company, and later as military and opinion editor. He also was the top editor in several other newsrooms in Colorado, New Mexico and Alabama. He is an Auburn University graduate, with a masters degree from Jacksonville State University.

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