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## Mental health bill passes House

By: **JASON JOHNSON** | 15 HOURS AGO

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Last week the U.S. House of Representatives moved forward with some of the first reforms to federally funded mental health care programs in decades in a legislative effort co-sponsored by U.S. Rep. Bradley Byrne (R-Alabama).

The Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act was authored by U.S. Rep. Tim Murphy (R-Pennsylvania), a clinical psychologist. However, Byrne — whose grandfather was shot and killed by a mentally ill person — has been a strong advocate for reforming the mental health system and became an early co-sponsor of Murphy's legislation.

"We are ending the era of stigma. Mental illness is no longer a joke, considered a moral defect and a reason to throw people in jail," Murphy said after the bill passed 422-2 on July 6. "Today the House voted to deliver treatment before tragedy."

In 2012, Murphy began a multi-year effort to evaluate the country's existing mental health services, but not without a concerted effort to separate reform from the partisan issue of gun control to gain broader support. Locally, Byrne said the focus should have always been on mental health.

"This bill helps ensure that our mental health programs actually work and that money is getting to the patients who need it most instead of getting stuck in bureaucracy," Byrne wrote last week.

The bill authorizes the development of new regulations for the handling of privacy laws in cases of "serious mental illness" and broadly loosens federal restrictions on groups that advocate for mental health patients. It also reauthorizes grants that are already available to states with existing treatment programs.

One of the more impactful changes increases the requirements of private insurers to cover mental health care and physical health care equally, and clarifies that Medicaid allows same-day billing for mental health and primary care of the same patient.

According to estimates from the Congressional Budget Office, H.R. 2646 is projected to reduce direct spending in the Medicaid program by \$5 million over the next nine years. It's possible the bill could generate Medicaid savings for states as well, though the amount could vary from state to state.

Byrne said the reforms "have the potential to make a real difference" in the mental health care available to U.S. citizens — calling the 422-2 vote "a major accomplishment." Though the legislative battle is only half won, Murphy is hopeful that broad support might be enough to "break the logjam on mental health reform in the Senate."

However, with an election on the horizon in November, that could prove trickier than usual because of the Senate's compressed schedule. The Senate ends its current session on July 15, and when members return in September it will be for only one month. After that, they won't convene again until after the general election in November.

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