



WEEKLY Update

Officials Look To Next Session For Mental Health System Fix

Health groups are hoping efforts to improve the state's mental health system will be a priority next session after legislation seeking to integrate physical and mental health services was defeated in the Senate on Tuesday – closing the door on any such changes this session.

Supporters of the two bills that failed would like to see a similar proposal return next session. One group opposed to what was offered this session by Senate [Majority Leader Mike Shirkey](#) (R-Clarklake) would like to see a focus on access to care and workforce needs.

The Senate on Tuesday voted 15-17 against [SB 597](#) Track and 15-19 against [SB 598](#) Track. The bills saw bipartisan votes against both. Mr. Shirkey spearheaded the effort on the bills since their introduction in July 2021, with the bills being substituted several times before unsuccessful votes (See [Gongwer Michigan Report, November 29, 2022](#)).

While his efforts may have been in vain, Mr. Shirkey in a Wednesday statement said he was pleased to have brought attention to a topic he feels is critically important and in need of a solution.

"Patients, families, caregivers, and taxpayers deserve so much better than what our broken mental health system is giving them," Mr. Shirkey said. "If my bringing more attention to this difficult issue this term leads to long overdue reforms next term it will have been well worth it."

Mr. Shirkey is departing the Legislature after this month due to term limits. Democrats will be taking control of both legislative chambers in January 2023, and it remains to be seen what direction they may wish to go on the topic if it emerges as a priority.

"Obviously it's something that we were pleased to see those bills not make it out of the Senate," Alan Bolter, associate director of the Community Mental Health Association of Michigan, said Wednesday. "Yesterday was certainly a do-or-die time for those bills."

Following the November 8 election, the path for the proposal likely narrowed significantly and Tuesday's votes all but ended any shot at movement on the topic this term. Mr. Bolter said he has advised his members to never say never, however.

For the next term, he said the association will be ready to work with the Legislature, administration and Department of Health and Human Services on three of its priorities: access to care, in-patient services and workforce needs.

As to the defeated legislation, Mr. Bolter said the policies dealt more with administration rather than addressing issues that need attention.

"It's never been a solution to any of the issues going on in Michigan," Mr. Bolter said of the bills.

Dominick Pallone, executive director of the Michigan Association of Health Plans, said Wednesday that while he was disappointed in the votes, he was pleased to see lawmakers continue work to craft a product that could get bipartisan support.

He said he was surprised, however, by the failure of the bills. Mr. Pallone added that the organization believes the bills as introduced were a strong move in the right direction and a full integration among the Medicaid population would be the best policy choice.

"It was an opportunity missed," Mr. Pallone said. "The health plans did not lose in this, the beneficiaries lost out on this."

Mr. Pallone said he is optimistic that the conversation on integrating physical and mental health care can continue next session. It will take educating new members of the Legislature and continuing to speak with veteran members to win them over, but he said the work is important and must continue so a solution can eventually be found.

"The current system is failing," Mr. Pallone said, adding that there is a recognition within the Legislature of that fact and that something must be done.

The votes to reject both bills were bipartisan, with seven Republicans joining 10 Democrats in opposition of SB 597, while nine Republicans joined 10 Democrats in opposition to SB 598. That also meant there was bipartisan support as well.

One positive of the votes, Mr. Pallone said, was the bipartisan support the package received.

MAHP will continue to be willing to work with the administration, DHHS and the Legislature to develop the right policy for the state. Mr. Pallone said his hope is that there will be interest among policymakers to continue work on what is a tough and complex issue.

During committee testimony on SB 597 and SB 598, Mr. Bolter expressed concerns about potential cost increases to the state and taxpayers. He also pointed out his group's belief that the legislation dealt with the administrative level and would eliminate public governance and oversight within the current system (See [Gongwer Michigan Report, September 14, 2021](#)).

Mr. Bolter added he was not surprised by the bipartisan rejection of the majority leader's proposal. He said there has been strong Democratic opposition to the bills, adding he long knew there were likely six to eight votes in opposition to possibly count on from Republicans, as well.

The GOP members who were opposed, he said, included those who have strong local relationships with their county commissions, their county sheriffs and local health care groups that could have been affected by the legislation's passage.

Mr. Bolter said it will likely take some time to speak with new lawmakers and build some support in working toward solutions, but that the group is hopeful of seeing progress under the next Legislature.

All three areas that the association sees as priorities, he said, are complex and would require significant work to address. He added they cannot just all be thrown together into a single bill and be resolved.

"We're focused on real solutions that actually help people," Mr. Bolter said.

– By Nick Smith
Gongwer