

Theodore R. Kulongoski
Governor



March 21, 2005

The Honorable Peter Courtney
Senate President
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

Dear President Courtney:

I write to express my strong support for SB 1 which would require group health plans to provide coverage for mental health and substance abuse services in a manner comparable to other physical health services.

In Oregon, we like to think of ourselves as pioneers – especially in the area of health care. Ironically, however, Oregon is one of just a few states that do not require significant group health insurance parity for mental health and substance abuse disorders. I submit that the time is long overdue for us as a state to explicitly recognize through our health insurance policy and regulation that meeting an individual's "health care" needs includes fair and equal treatment of both one's brain and body. SB 1 would accomplish that goal by ending discrimination against those among us who suffer from mental health and addiction disorders.

Those who oppose SB 1 argue that the cost of parity is something Oregon cannot afford. On the contrary, I believe that the costs to individuals, to employers, and to the state resulting from our current lack of parity are unsustainable. When individuals with mental illness and chemical dependency receive adequate treatment, symptoms are reduced, children learn and thrive, and adults are able to work and participate as productive members of society. Moreover, from a purely economic perspective, we now know that implementing parity results in only minimal health insurance premium cost increases that are more than offset by savings to employers, such as decreased costs of other health services, lower employee absenteeism and increased productivity, and fewer claims for disability and employment insurance.

Finally, I would ask that as you and your members consider their vote on SB 1, that you also consider the incredible pressure Oregon's public mental health and addiction services currently face. SB 1 would enable more insured individuals and families to seek earlier and more comprehensive care, thereby allowing Oregon's public system to more efficiently respond to the growing needs of persons without health insurance.

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My thanks to you and to others in your caucus for your leadership on this issue, and my thanks to all of the members of the Senate for considering these comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Theodore R. Kulongoski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'T'.

THEODORE R. KULONGOSKI
Governor