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DOMENICI, KENNEDY & ENZI GAIN LONG-AWAITED SENATE PASSAGE OF NEW MENTAL HEALTH PARITY BILL

Legislation Will Build on Landmark 1996 Parity Law

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senators Pete Domenici (R-N.M.), Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.) today looked ahead to pushing for congressional passage of their sweeping mental health legislation following Senate approval of the bill Tuesday evening.

The Senate approved the **Mental Health Parity Act of 2007** (S.558) by unanimous consent. The measure, approved by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee in mid-February, was developed by the lawmakers in talks with mental health, insurance and business organizations to craft compromise legislation. The bill, with 57 cosponsors, has broad bipartisan support.

S.558 builds on a 1996 Mental Health Parity law by requiring health insurance plans that offer mental health coverage to provide that coverage on par with financial and treatment coverage offered for other physical illnesses. It does not mandate that group plans must provide any mental health coverage, but will improve coverage for about 113 million Americans.

“I am elated that the Senate has at long last passed a broad mental health parity bill. It is a needed next step toward ending the insurance discrimination imposed on millions of people with serious, but treatable mental health problems,” **Domenici** said. “The broad support we have for mental health parity will propel this bill toward enactment this year. We need to lift the restrictive standard being applied to mental health coverage and allow these diseases of the brain to be treated under the broader standard applied to medical and surgical coverage.”

“The passage of the Mental Health Parity bill underscores our commitment to treat all patients facing all diseases with the dignity and respect they deserve. This new legislation will bring dramatic new help to millions of Americans who today are denied needed mental health care and treatment. This bill represents a major breakthrough for those with mental health needs, ensuring their access to fair and equitable health insurance,” **Kennedy** said.

“This legislation will bring fairness and relief to millions of Americans with mental illness. It unites mental health advocacy, provider, employer, and insurance communities to

advance a noble goal. The bill is years, if not decades, in the making, and reflects countless hours of sweat and negotiation. I want to thank Senator Domenici and Senator Kennedy for their invaluable leadership on this important issue,” **Enzi** said.

Domenici is a long-time mental health advocate, while Kennedy and Enzi are chairman and ranking member, respectively, of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee that has jurisdiction over this issue.

S.558 would provide mental health parity for about 113 million Americans who work for employers with 50 or more employees. It will ensure that health plans do not place more restrictive conditions on mental health coverage than on medical or surgical coverage. As such it would require:

- Parity for financial requirements like deductibles, co-payments, and annual and lifetime limits; and,
- Parity for treatment limitations such as the number of covered hospital days and visits.

The measure was crafted following almost two years of negotiation involving lawmakers, mental health, insurance and business organizations to develop compromise legislation. The Senate bill has been endorsed by scores of business, insurance and health organizations.

The 1996 Mental Health Parity law, authored by Domenici and the late Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone, only provided parity for annual and lifetime limits between mental health coverage and medical surgical coverage.

The new Senate-passed bill expands parity by including deductibles, co-payments, out-of-pocket expenses, coinsurance, covered hospital days, and covered out-patient visits. The measure also includes a small business exemption for companies with fewer than 50 employees, as well as a cost exemption for all businesses.

Today, about 26 percent of American adults, or nearly 58 million people, suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder each year. Six percent of these adults suffer from a serious mental illness. Mental illness is also closely linked to the more than 30,000 suicides in the United States every year. In addition, an estimated 16 percent of all inmates in state and local jails suffer from a mental illness.