



July 29, 2021

The Honorable Lorena Gonzalez
Chairwoman, Assembly Appropriations Committee
State Capitol, Room 2114
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: SB 221 (Wiener): Health care coverage: timely access to care – Support

Dear Chairwoman Gonzalez,

On behalf of the California State Association of Psychiatrists, I write to express strong support of SB 221 (Wiener), Timely Access Standards. SB 221 will close a loophole in state law and regulations and establish a clear and appropriate timely access standard for follow-up appointments for mental health care and substance use disorder (MH/SUD) treatment.

Current law and regulations have been interpreted to require HMOs under the jurisdiction of the Department of Managed Health Care (DHMC) and health insurers under the jurisdiction of the California Department of Insurance (CDI) to offer enrollees initial appointments with non-physician mental health and substance use disorder (MH/SUD) providers within ten business days, but not to establish similar standards for offering needed follow-up care from these providers.

Compassionate and effective mental health and substance use disorder treatment relies on ongoing and consistent courses of treatment. However, it is common for patients to wait more than 4 weeks for a follow-up appointment for clinically appropriate treatment. Delays in accessing appropriate treatment can lead to:

- longer recovery times,
- worsening outcomes,
- increased morbidity and mortality rates,
- increased time away from work,
- increased strain on families,
- increased risk of decompensation, and
- accelerating crises requiring more costly and intensive care.

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In the past year, the Covid-19 pandemic has upended our daily lives and increased the incidence of anxiety and depression in our communities. Moreover, during the pandemic, even more than before, California's challenges in addressing problems of homelessness and housing, education, and criminal justice are being exacerbated by the lack of timely follow-up treatment for MH/SUD patients who desperately need it. Expanding timely access to MH/SUD services over the full course of treatment that patients require for healing must be one of California's highest priorities.

SB 221 is consistent with and complementary to last year's groundbreaking mental health parity legislation, SB 855, and will ensure California's continued national leadership on these issues. For these reasons, the California State Association of Psychiatrists is pleased to support this legislation and would like to urge your aye vote on this measure.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Yoder", written in a cursive style.

Paul J. Yoder
Legislative Advocate

Cc: Members, Assembly Appropriations Committee
Senator Scott Wiener