

The Affordable Care Act builds on the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 to extend parity protections to millions of Americans. Under federal and state laws, mental health and substance use disorders can no longer be treated any differently than other medical problems.

But what good are those laws if health insurers can skirt them?

Now more than ever, we must act to ensure all Californians suffering from a mental health or substance abuse disorder get the treatment they deserve. In California, an estimated 500,000 people with mental health needs are now eligible for health insurance coverage.

Stronger enforcement laws are needed to safeguard consumers from health insurers who routinely ignore the law.

How many lives must be shattered and families broken because they could not access treatment or had their coverage cut off by an insurance company that circumvents our parity laws?

As Chair of the California Senate Mental Health Caucus and Select Committee on Mental Health I organized a coalition of leaders -- including Senate Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg and California Insurance Commissioner Dave Jones -- to make mental health and substance abuse parity a top budget priority.

The ***Mental Health Parity Enforcement Budget Act*** would dramatically improve consumer and provider transparency, a major focus in the final parity regulations issued in November 2013.

The act also would adopt national standards and force health insurers to submit documented evidence --surveys of consumers and providers and other analysis to prove they are complying with the law. But most importantly it provides the funding-- derived from fees on insurance plans -- to ensure regulators have the tools they need to enforce the tougher standards and rules.