Autism insurance bill passes House, 120-0

Written by Emily Le Coz
Feb. 11, 2014 8:18 PM |

clarionledger.com

Legislation mandating insurance coverage for autism therapies passed the full House floor in a 120-0 vote on Tuesday, an unprecedented step for a state that has previously rejected such bills despite the skyrocketing rate of autism.

“I think everybody over here understands it’s a good bill,” said its author, state Rep. Steve Massengill, R-Hickory Flat. “We’ll see what happens to it over there” in the Senate.

The bill now heads to the Senate, where Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves will refer it to one or more committees that will have until March 4 to pass it.

If it makes it through committee, it would then head to the full Senate floor for a vote no later than March 12.

Reeves said the “Senate will consider the policy and review the financial implications of House Bill 542 once it is received from the House.”

House Bill 542 requires the State and Schools Employee Health Insurance Plan to cover diagnosis and treatment of autism, a disorder that impairs communication and socialization and also results in repetitive behaviors and restricted interests.

The bill was amended prior to passage with the addition of one statement. It restricts coverage to “generally accepted medical treatments” and those which have been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

“As long as everybody understands that it doesn’t have to be approved by the FDA and (also) be generally accepted, that it’s either-or, that’s fine,” said Lorri Unumb, vice president of state government affairs for Autism Speaks.

The national autism advocacy organization supports the Mississippi bill.

“We don’t want insurance companies to be forced to cover things that aren’t generally accepted standards of care,” Unumb said. “We want to be treated like every other condition so that the things that are standard process are covered but not special treatment such as swimming with dolphins.”

This is now the longest-surviving legislation of its kind in the eight consecutive years lawmakers have introduced autism insurance bills.

The rate of autism has skyrocketed 381 percent in Mississippi in the past nine years, according to data from the state Department of Education.

One in 88 children now has the disorder, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates. That’s 10,175 youths under the age of 21 in Mississippi alone.

Yet most families in the state struggling with autism — which impairs communication and socialization — lack health insurance coverage for many of the therapies shown to reduce its severity.

“I’m unbelievably relieved and excited at how much this will help so many families in Mississippi,” said Ripley resident Quess Hood, whose 6-year-old son has autism. “I hope the lieutenant governor will take this up.”

Hood is a state employee.

Some families have complained the bill should apply to all health insurance providers, not just the state plan. But supporters say it's an important first step and that the legislation can be expanded next year.

The State and School Employees' Health Insurance Plan covers roughly 185,000 participants, about one-fourth of whom are dependents, according to information from the state Department of Finance and Administration.

That's a fraction of the nearly 2.3 million state residents covered by other health plans.

More than 30 states already have laws requiring health insurers to cover autism therapies. It has raised premiums there an average of 31 cents per policy holder, according to an independent study conducted by Autism Speaks.

To contact Emily Le Coz, call (601) 961-7249 or follow @emily_lecoz on Twitter.