



May 30, 2018

West Side Heroin Task Force Making Progress

As the West Side Heroin Task Force continues its work in fighting the epidemic of overdoses due to heroin, we hear from people who continue to struggle with using heroin, as well as from their doctors and other providers of care. One of the biggest needs that we hear about is the need for a place to stay for a period of time, maybe some months, as people with opioid use disorder, or addiction to heroin, try to put their lives back together. Not all people need to stay in the hospital, but many feel that they will make more progress if they are able to stay in a positive place that supports their efforts in recovery.

However, most insurance companies do not currently cover these residential extended care services, even though policies might cover more expensive hospital “detox” programs or other inpatient hospital stays.

Because we need to begin to address this gap in care and services at this crucial time in this opioid epidemic that is affecting so many people on the West Side and throughout Illinois, I worked with many stakeholders to introduce House Bill 5868. A leader in this effort has been Neli Vazquez Rowland, Co-Founder and President of A Safe Haven Foundation, who runs a successful residential treatment program on the West Side.

Basically, HB 5868 allows, but does not mandate, insurance companies to write policies that will cover community-based behavioral health recovery home services. This is a big step forward. HB 5868 is legislation people in Illinois need if we want to see improvements in homelessness, opioid use and drug use disorders, crime, unemployment, and incarceration rates. We need state-licensed community-based organizations, who really understand and care about the people in the community, to contribute to make the real changes.

More specifically, HB 5868 amends the Illinois Insurance Code and permits a group or individual policy of accident and health insurance or managed care to provide coverage for residential extended care services and supports for persons suffering from alcoholism or other substance use disorder so long as: (1) a health care clinic or any other specified entity has conducted an individualized assessment of the person's condition prior to discharge and has identified the person as being at risk of a drug or alcohol relapse and in need of supportive services to maintain long-term recovery; (2) the residential extended care services and supports are administered by a community-based agency that is licensed by or under contract with the Department of Human Services; and (3) the residential extended care services and supports are administered upon the referral of a health care clinic or any other specified entity.

HB 5868 also amends the Illinois Public Aid Code and permits the Medicaid fee-for-service and managed care medical assistance programs established under the Code to provide coverage for residential extended care services and supports for any person suffering from alcoholism or other drug addiction who is at risk of a drug or alcohol relapse following discharge from a health care clinic or any other specified entity.

If HB 5868 becomes law, Neli Vazquez Rowland of A Safe Haven Foundation states, "I predict that Illinois will now be in a position to set the national standard of care for substance use disorders and mental health in a much more thoughtful, multidisciplinary and sustainable manner, and serve as the benchmark, with groundbreaking ideas that disrupt the status quo and negative trends. The changes in the healthcare delivery system will reduce the rates of recidivism, improve outcomes and save more lives, and lower costs."

According to Elliot Richardson, President, Small Business Advocacy Council, "Opioid and substance abuse disorders has a profound effect on the small business community. The productivity of employees struggling with substance abuse, and prolonged absences associated with addiction, wreak havoc on small businesses. In addition, the opioid crisis has increased the costs of workers compensation and health insurance for small employers. There is bipartisan legislation in the Illinois General Assembly that allows health insurance companies to cover state licensed residential care, including recovery homes, for substance abuse. This treatment will help individuals suffering from opioid abuse and other forms of behavioral and mental health issues, manage their condition and return to work. Passing HB 5868 will benefit those suffering from substance abuse disorders and help small businesses maintain a healthier workforce."

HB 5868 has been passed by the House and the Senate. So, let's urge Governor Rauner to sign this bill into law. Let's work to do all we can to provide what is needed for people with substance use disorders who are trying to recover. For more information about treatment, the Illinois Helpline for Opioids and Other Substances is: 1-833-2FINDHELP.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Ford', written in a cursive style.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District