

January 12, 2023

Public Comment for House Bill 2 – Health & Human Services

Nursing Home Provider Rates

- “I support funding for Nursing Home Provide Rates. We need to pay our providers competitive rates, or else risk more nursing homes closing. A study commissioned by the Governor proved to retain nursing home workers and health care workers, the state needs to increase provider rates. The Governor continues to ignore his own study.

I support funding for CSCT. Montana children need fully funded mental health care support in our schools. We need to fully fund CSCT and get it out of the hands of the OPI, who aren't serious about addressing school children's behavioral health needs.”

-Steven Shapero

- “My name is Edith Yeargin. I am a mom of 6 wonderful children, grandmother of 22 awesome grands, and great-grandmother of 3. I am a retired school teacher and now I am a caregiver for Jack R. I was asked to speak to you today on behave of the caregivers of Montana.

Being a caregiver is one of the most rewarding jobs I have ever done. I moved to MT. From AL after retiring from my 30 year teaching career. Here I met Jack several years ago when he was employed by my son. At that time Jack was and still is a handsome active young man. After his accident, he called and asked if I would work for him. I had never worked as a caregiver but he assured me that he could teach me.

Caregiving is one of the most important yet, rewarding jobs. As caregivers we are protecting the most vulnerable members of our society. These people are as significant and important as anyone else. A caregiver is able to vastly improve the life of their client. Nothing is more important than the people in our lives... especially those we care for. Many times a caregiver has to go early. 6 a.m. to help their client. Or work holidays or weekends whatever it takes to aid their clients in their daily lives A caregiver needs to be skilled and compassionate as well as consistent in helping their client. The work is not only draining physically, but also emotionally.

Therefore, it would seem fitting that the wage of a caregiver should be higher than it is currently. Caregivers have to be able to afford the cost of our current economic situation. Our wages should be higher than 12.41 per hour. Montana needs to raise the wages of those caring for our most vulnerable yet valued in our society.”

-Edith Yeargin

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Medicaid Provider Rates & Eligibility Rules

- “I am writing to implore lawmakers to take the recommendations from international consulting firm Guidehouse Inc., which found Montana's Medicaid rates for behavioral health providers are 22% below the "benchmark standards," and put ostensible action into place. Montana's behavioral health services have and continue to be hampered by unacceptably low reimbursement rates, both in comparison to physical medicine providers as well as behavioral health providers in other states. The "loser" in our current model is clinicians and the families and children they serve. For too long we have been undervalued, overworked, and grossly underpaid. This consideration is very important given private insurance companies generally adjust their reimbursement rates in-step with Medicaid.

We have a dearth of behavioral health providers in the state of Montana yet, per population, one of the highest needs. One cannot expect access and quality of care to change unless reimbursement rates for these services also change. As a pediatric neuropsychologist, I have seen my overall reimbursement rates slashed nearly 30% in the past several years. Seeing Medicaid patients will no longer be financially feasible unless some significant changes are made. HB-2 (JAS on Health and Human Services" is a step in the right direction, though many subsequent steps will be needed to adequately serve the children and families in need of such medical care.

It is also important to note that the average training program for neuropsychologists is commensurate if not longer than that required for medical doctors. As it pertains to neuropsychologists, we are trained in both physical (neurology) and behavioral (psychology) medicine. I understand the historical and erroneous discrepancy between physical and behavioral health reimbursement rates by provider type, but the idea someone with substantially less training in behavioral health is paid nearly 50% more than a psychologist who specializes in the field seems illogical.

The Rural Institute at the University of Montana conducted one of the most expansive behavioral health service studies in Montana to date and identified access to neuropsychologists as one of the most frequent requests. Neuropsychologists throughout Montana regularly have >12-month waitlists for services, yet Medicaid reimbursement rates for our services continue to decrease. Based on current reimbursement rates, it is challenging to even cover the operating costs of a psychometrist.

Medicaid rate adjustments have not paralleled increased neuropsychological evaluation operating costs and changes due to the pandemic; in fact, we have experienced decreases in reimbursement rates. Further, to my knowledge, psychological/neuropsychological evaluation service rates have not been adjusted to even account for general inflation (i.e., approximately 2% annually).

I very much appreciate your time and consideration.”

-Eric Aune

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- “I am writing to express my concerns regarding Medicaid eligibility rules. DPHHS needs to restore continuous eligibility. They need to take a commonsense approach to redetermining eligibility reequipments. The current plan could kick 43,000 Montanans off their health care plan and will disproportionately affect Tribal health care services.”

-June Ellestad

- “DPHHS and Governor Gianforte have made it easier to kick people off their health care by changing the Medicaid eligibility rules, which will disproportionately affect Tribal health care services. DPHHS needs to restore continuous eligibility and redetermine eligibility requirements in a slower and more responsible way. The current plan for changing eligibility is irresponsible and could remove health care for over 43,000 Montanans.”

-Steven Shapero

- “I am writing to express my support for adequate support for Montana's Health System. The Governor commissioned the Guidehouse study, however, his budgeted ignores his study. in that the funding he is proposing for paying critical care providers is 1/3 of the recommended amount. To retain care providers and to pay the workers their deserved wage the state must pay the amounts recommended by the Governor's study.”

-June Ellestad

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Youth Mental Health Services

- “The state is facing a health care crisis: MT children need fully-funded mental health care support in schools. We need to fully fund CSCT Get it out of the hands of the OPI who have proven again that they aren't serious about addressing school children's behavioral health needs.”

-Gil Jordan

- “I was an elementary teacher at Noxon Public Schools for 28 years. I definitely know that children need fully funded mental health care support in schools. Please support this bill.”

-Bonita J Reishus

- “Comprehensive School and Community Treatment. Montana families and children need a fully funded mental health support in schools. It was obvious to me, when working for a Montana Tribal Health and when my adopted children were in school, that OPI is not equipped or serious about caring for school children's mental health or behavioral health needs.”

-June Ellestad

- “It is extremely important that we fully fund school mental health services for our young people. Early intervention is key to successful mitigation of mental and behavioral issues. Please support this part of the Appropriations Bill. Thank you!”

-Donna Martin

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Disability Services

- “I’m a C-5 quadriplegic and been in a chair for four years. One of the most frightening processes I’ve learned through this experience is finding reliable compassionate trustworthy caregivers and keeping them employed. I depend full assist to do the basic needs (getting in and out of bed, bathing, bowel care, dressing, eating etc.) which is taxing on both caregivers and recipient. This often leads to burnout on both parties resulting in need for multiple caregivers. The wage increase will give greater opportunity screening for caregivers and retaining high quality caregivers. I wouldn’t be working the 2023 Montana Legislature if it wasn’t for the care I receive allowing me to be here in front of you all today.”

-Jack Ricicot

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HEART Fund

- “Please support HB 2 as our children need to have full mental health funding and OPI has not provided this.”

-Beverly Brumbaugh

- “Hello, my name is Colby Nielson, I live in Missoula and I am in support of HB 2. I am a mom of two and work at Lowell Elementary. My son Dharrien has been struggling with mental and behavioral health issues starting at age 9. He is now 11 and there has yet to be any help provided. Our current system for mental health for youth (i.e. group homes, outpatient, residential) has failed my son for the past almost 3 years. He was denied for not being old enough, and because no group home could meet his high level of need. They weren't equipped to handle his behavior because of lack of staffing.

Due to all of this I have not been able to adequately work a full-time job for several years. I am only able to work 10-15 hours per week due to his high level of need. I'm barely living paycheck to paycheck. Because of inflation I have to choose between putting \$20 in my gas tank to get to work or paying my utility bill. If passed, this would directly impact my ability to work and give back to my community.

As a last resort we have had to utilize the emergency services (911 and ED) on numerous occasions. These services have been little to no help. If this bill passed, it would make it possible for my son to access mental health services that would actually help him and reduce our need to utilize the emergency visits. This would save money for our state in the long run.

If my son could be given a chance and provided adequate care, my son would be better off, and I would be able to provide for my family better. He is still struggling and getting worse, day by day, because there is no adequate care for his needs due to the system, we are currently in.

Please consider my story and vote yes. “

-Colby Nielson