

## Memo

From: Anita Roessmann, Staff Attorney, Disability Rights Montana

Re: Legislative Update for May 4, 2009

Hello everyone,

It is a gloriously sunny and optimistic day in Helena. Change is definitely in the air. If you haven't already, please channel some of that positive energy towards the Governor's office by calling in your support for the mental health crisis services bills. **444-3111**.

The legislature left town last Tuesday, but the Governor's office has been hard at work. The Governor's health policy advisor, Eve Franklin, has reportedly spoken to dozens of mental health system stakeholders in the last few days. She has been gathering information about the level of support for the mental health crisis services bills to convey to Governor Schweitzer. All three of the bills—HB 130, 131 and 132—have been on the Governor's desk since last week. He has until Friday to sign, veto or amend the bills. If he takes no action, the bills will become law without his approval.

Meanwhile, the two big appropriations bills—HB 2 and HB 645—which contain appropriations totaling \$2.5 million for the crisis bills, are still in the hands of legislative staff. They haven't been transmitted to the Governor yet. Once they are transmitted, the Governor will have ten days to act. We probably won't know the fate of the funding for these bills until late next week at the earliest.

Ah, the suspense!

There is still time to influence the Governor, who has said he would carefully consider each bill that came to him.

***DIAL 444-3111 and ask Governor Schweitzer: Please support the mental health crisis bills and their funding.***

Below is the editorial that appeared in Helena's Independent Record yesterday. It summarizes the bills and the important public health policy change they signal. At the bottom is more information about how to contact the Governor's office.

## **Mental health needs funding**

*By Independent Record - IR view - 05/03/2009*

Three critical bills designed to improve community-based mental health care await Gov. Brian Schweitzer's signature, as does the funding in House Bill 2 to support them.

The legislation - House Bills 130, 131 and 132 - would fund the expansion of community-based mental health care services across the state in an effort to primarily achieve two things:

- Improve the process of fully treating mental health patients, both during crises and after, in or near the towns and cities where they live.
- Relieve over-capacity problems at the state hospital in Warm Springs.

Gov. Schweitzer has indicated he will exercise his line-item veto power to remove the nearly \$2.8 million in funding for the services these bills create despite the fact it is already appropriated in the balanced biennium budget, House Bill 2.

Vetoing this funding simply because it wasn't included in the governor's original budget proposal, or because it's a new program with ongoing funding, is preposterous.

The Legislature, in swooping bipartisanship, made cuts in the Department of Justice and the Department of Corrections to make room for this particular funding.

It's imperative these bills are enacted into law. Unless Gov. Schweitzer has another plan to fully fund the implementation of community-based mental health services elsewhere in the existing budget, vetoing the funding for these acute pieces of legislation would demonstrate a lack of leadership on his part.

Montana currently has the highest suicide rate in the nation. That's an abysmal statistic that, without significant change in the way mental health patients are treated and the services that are available, will likely escalate.

Across the state, the number of patients seeking interim and permanent treatment has grown.

In Helena, the Center for Mental Health - just one of the prongs experts say is needed to fully treat patients across the spectrum - has seen more than 220 new applications since October, with a peak of 47 new patient admission requests in January.

It doesn't stop there.

The patient capacity at Warm Springs is 135, yet it has been packed with nearly 190 to 210 patients at a time during the past couple years.

Across the board, Montana is spending millions of dollars on mental health crises, but we're going about it the wrong way. The money is being spent in our local jails, in our state prisons, in our hospital emergency rooms and in the back of squad cars as they transport patients from their homes to Warm Springs.

Waiting to treat patients until the moment of crisis is not only wrong fiscally, it's morally irresponsible, and something needs to give.

Among cities in Montana, Helena seems to have it figured out. When crisis services went dark some years ago, mental health officials continually lobbied to add it and expanded services back.

From the opening of the new behavioral health unit at St. Peter's Hospital, run by an outside company, to the expansion of services through Rocky Mountain Development Council, the Center for Mental Health, the Montana chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness and the Veterans Affairs hospital, Helena gets it.

It's been a communal, all-hands-on-deck approach - at the community level - to improve our overall mental health services.

Ask any of the local officials, and they'll tell you, it's this full-scale partnership of working together, not just as individuals, that is ultimately what works best for ongoing patient treatment.

Helena has shown tremendous leadership in this department, making significant progress by establishing an extensive network of "help lines" for those who need it.

Now it's time for the state to follow suit.

Everything is a balance when it comes to statewide funding. But it's also an opportunity to communicate a state's values by where we spend our money.

And now Gov. Schweitzer has a golden opportunity to clearly demonstrate that the lack of mental health services in Montana is a major problem that needs fixed.

He has a perfect platform to send a clear signal that he's behind the cause, that he believes in the efforts of those in the trenches.

It's a matter of priority. Is mental health a priority, Governor?

It should be.

Please do not line-item veto this critical funding for House Bills 130, 131 and 132.

Click on the following links to see the bills:

<http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/2009/billpdf/HB0130.pdf>

<http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/2009/billpdf/HB0131.pdf>

<http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/2009/billpdf/HB0132.pdf>

***How to contact the Governor:***

- **CALL THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE:** 406-444-3111
- Send an email to the Governor by using the on-line contact form:  
<http://governor.mt.gov/contact/commentsform.asp>

- Mail a letter:

**Governor Brian D. Schweitzer**

Office of the Governor  
Montana State Capitol Bldg.  
P.O. Box 200801  
Helena MT 59620-0801

- Fax a letter: 406-444-5529
- Pass along this message to other advocates and supporters of community crisis services.

Please call me on my cell phone if you have any questions, 406-461-5350, or write to me at [anita@disabilityrightsmt.org](mailto:anita@disabilityrightsmt.org) .

Thank you for all you do for people with disabilities.

Anita

Anita Roessmann  
Staff Attorney  
Disability Rights Montana  
1022 Chestnut  
Helena, Montana 59601  
800-245-4743  
406-449-2344  
406-449-2418 fax  
[anita@disabilityrightsmt.org](mailto:anita@disabilityrightsmt.org)