

What Does the Affordable Care Act Mean for Addiction Treatment?

The Affordable Care Act (ACA), signed into law by President Obama in March 2010, improves coverage for and access to health care for substance use disorders.

Under the new law, services such as screening, early intervention, treatment, and recovery support for patients with substance use disorders will be provided in the same manner and in the same, primary care settings as services for diabetes, asthma, or any other illness. The change will bring needed help to many as it also increases awareness that drug dependence is a chronic, treatable disease.

In 2008, 23.1 million Americans age 12 and older needed treatment for a substance use problem, and yet only 2.3 million – one in ten – received care at a specialty treatment center. Many of those who do not receive, but could benefit from, treatment do not have health insurance or other means to pay for it. By helping more people get the care they need, the ACA, when fully implemented in 2014, will go a long way toward closing the “treatment gap.”

Features of the healthcare law that will benefit those in need of treatment for substance use disorders include:

- **Broader Coverage for Americans with Substance Use Disorders** - Of the 32 million currently uninsured Americans who will receive health insurance under the new law, about 5 million meet medical diagnostic criteria for a substance use disorder. These Americans will receive insurance coverage to help pay for substance use treatment.
- **No Denial of Coverage for Pre-Existing Conditions** - Insurers will no longer be able to deny coverage based on pre-existing medical conditions, such as substance use disorders.
- **Plans Must Cover Substance Use Disorders** - Individuals and small businesses will have access to affordable coverage through a new competitive private health insurance market through state-based Health Insurance Exchanges. Plans offered through the Exchanges are required to cover mental health and substance use disorder services and must meet the “parity” requirements of the Wellstone-Domenici Mental Health Parity Act of 2008.
- **Greater Access to Treatment through Medicaid** - In 2014, Medicaid eligibility will be expanded for families or individuals with incomes up to 133 percent of Federal poverty guidelines. Many newly eligible beneficiaries will receive substance use services. Participation in Medicaid will help more patients gain access to traditional healthcare benefits, such as medications and behavioral therapies in the treatment of addiction.