



Combating eating disorders gains ample bipartisan support

August 20, 2015

By Valerie A. Canady

Comprehensive eating disorders legislation that provides for early identification and intervention, treatment and training continues to gain bipartisan support, according to advocates who are positive efforts will continue to progress when lawmakers reconvene. Among its provisions, the legislation supports research into advertising practices like photoshopping.

Reps. Ted Deutch (D-Fla.) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) introduced the Anna Westin Act of 2015 (H. 2515) in late May. The bill focuses on clarifying coverage for residential treatment service for eating disorders, and will use existing funds to create grant programs to educate and train health professionals, school personnel and the public on early identification of eating disorders.

The legislation incorporates the Truth in Advertising Act, requiring the Federal Trade Commission to study the extent to which digitally altered body and facial images of people in advertising may contribute to eating disorders in children and young adults.

A companion bill (S. 1865) was introduced in the Senate July 27 by Sens. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), Kelly Ayotte (R-N.H.), Shelly Moore Capito (R-W.Va.) and Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.). The legislation also clarifies the Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act to require that health insurance companies cover residential treatment for eating disorders.

The bill is named for Anna Westin of Chaska, Minn., who was diagnosed with anorexia when she was 16 years old, according to a press release from the Eating Disorders Coalition, the organization that spearheaded the legislation. According to the coalition, Westin's health deteriorated quickly, and she was facing liver malfunction and low body temperatures and blood pressure.

Despite the urgency of Westin's condition, her family was informed that they had to wait until their insurance company "certified" Westin's treatment, ultimately delaying and limiting the treatment she received. After struggling with the disease for five years, Westin committed suicide at the age of 21.

Expansive coverage

"The Anna Westin Act of 2015 was designed with the goal of improving the lives of people experiencing eating disorders and their families through early identification and intervention of eating disorders and more expansive health insurance coverage for treatment," Katrina Velasquez, Esq., policy director for the Eating Disorders Coalition, told *MHW*.

Velasquez added, "The bill is designed to have a zero CBO [Congressional Budget Office] score by using existing funds to enact this important piece of legislation."

The Anna Westin Act represents the first-ever piece of comprehensive eating disorders legislation containing elements of early identification and intervention training and treatment to receive bipartisan support from both the House and Senate, said Velasquez.

"There have been past pieces of legislation in both the House and Senate that address pieces of this legislation (i.e., training on early identification), but none as comprehensive that had bipartisan support in the House and Senate," she said.

Gaining support

The House bill is steadily gaining bipartisan support, with recent sign-ons including key committee members such as Rep. Erik Paulsen (R-Minn.) from the Ways and Means Committee and Leonard Lance (R-N.J.) and Paul Tonko (D-N.Y.) from the Energy and Commerce Committee, said Velasquez. "Additionally, Rep. John Kline [R-Minn.], chairman of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, recently signaled to Eating Disorders Coalition advocates that he will be bringing this legislation to the committee," she said.

Meanwhile, "Things are slowly progressing and will likely pick up when the Senate is back in session," Velasquez said.

"The National Eating Disorders Association [NEDA] strongly supports the Anna Westin Act," Claire Mysko, director of programs for NEDA, told *MHW*. "Through increased awareness, early detection, education and training, this bill can potentially save thousands of lives, and may reduce the prevalence of these illnesses in the United States."

NEDA will soon be introducing complementary legislation with Rep. Renee Ellmers (R-N.C.), which will establish a pilot program for early intervention strategies in schools, said Mysko. "The Anna Westin Act and the early intervention legislation will be central to our organization's legislative agenda," she said.

