

Mental health benefits under the Affordable Care Act

What are the major ways the ACA will benefit persons affected by mental illness

- **The ACA will expand health insurance coverage** by providing affordable health insurance to uninsured individuals who were unable to obtain private or public coverage. To accomplish this goal, states will establish health insurance exchanges (marketplaces offering choice to consumers and promoting completion among vendors).

While individuals will be required to obtain coverage, those of more modest means will be able to receive tax credits to assist with the payment of premiums and cost-sharing subsidies to help with out-of-pocket costs. For poor people, the ACA potentially will expand Medicaid eligibility to 17 million more Americans, but unfortunately individual states may choose to decline the expansion. It is estimated that, of the 32 million people who will gain coverage under the ACA, 4 to 6 million currently have untreated mental illness or addiction.

- **The ACA has expanded dependent coverage** for young adults up to age 26. With regard to mental illness, this extension is especially important since most psychiatric illness emerges by this age. Coverage under their parents' insurance plan will enable young adults to obtain early treatment.
- Beginning in 2014, **mental illness and substance abuse can no longer be considered "pre-existing conditions"** by insurers to deny coverage, and insurers will not be able to use these conditions to terminate insurance or raise premiums. From an epidemiologic perspective, most people with mental illness already have a pre-existing condition by the time they seek to purchase insurance for the first time. Half of all serious psychiatric illnesses appear by 14 years of age, and three-fourths are present by age 25.
- The ACA **eliminated lifetime limits** on the dollar value of coverage beginning in 2010 and **will eliminate annual limits** on the dollar value of coverage beginning in 2014. Since mental illnesses are treatable but generally chronic, it was irrational and unjust to put caps on treatment.

The ACA benefits persons with mental illness in many other ways, including expanding access to prevention and wellness services; providing grants to school-based health centers that offer mental health and addiction services; creating incentives to coordinate primary care with mental health and addiction services; and requiring state Medicaid programs to cover benzodiazepines and barbiturates. For more information or to read the text of the ACA, go to www.healthcare.gov.