

Idaho to require coverage for autism treatment

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho is joining a long list of states to require health insurers provide coverage for the treatment of autism, Department of Insurance Director Dean Cameron announced Monday.

"Due to currently inconsistent coverage of treatments for autism spectrum disorder by Idaho health plans, the Department of Insurance is clarifying that such treatments cannot be excluded from coverage if rehabilitative or habilitative services are covered," Cameron wrote in his bulletin to insurers.

If insurers exclude treatments for autism for plans that already cover for services like occupational or speech therapy, the insurance agency will now consider that practice discriminatory and prohibited. The requirement is expected to apply to the majority of plans offered throughout the state.

Previously, Idaho was one of six states that did not require insurers cover autism treatments. Out of the five major carriers in Idaho, two were already providing such coverage but Cameron said the remaining insurers are open to the department's newest requirement.

Cameron announced the decision during a gubernatorial proclamation signing declaring April 2 "World Autism Awareness day" in Idaho. The signing attracted families with children who have autism, health advocates who have long pushed for such coverage requirements in Idaho and Lt. Gov. Brad Little, who led the ceremony.

"Idaho is behind compared to the rest of the states ... but now you can go through the normal route to get these services with your insurance that you're already paying for," said Sharon Oberleitner, who has a 25-year-old son diagnosed with autism and co-founder of a business. "This benefits the state, it benefits families and it benefits the professionals looking to come here."

Autism is a range of disorders that hinder the ability to communicate and interact. Most doctors believe there is no cure. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 1 in 68 American children are diagnosed with it.

Efforts to expand autism coverage have been in place since the early 2000s, where families in South Carolina and Indiana pushed lawmakers to pass laws that required coverage of autism therapy. Advocates say the trend has become more and more successful over the years as benefits of expanded coverage become more recognized.

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