August 18, 2014

Letter of Inquiry: Health Reform and Public Programs Initiative
From: Alternative News Foundation

**How Healthy is the ACA’s Mental Health Care in California?**

For the tens of thousands of Californians who require mental health care at some point in their lives, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) offers a new promise that mental health care will be accessible, affordable and on par with physical health care. This journalism project, undertaken jointly by a consortium of California and national news outlets, asks how well California health care is meeting these new standards.

**The Problem**

For the first time in US history, Congress has mandated that mental health care be on parity with physical health care, and that insurance companies cannot use pre-existing mental health conditions to deny health care coverage. In addition, California took up the option that Congress gave states to expand Medi-Cal to the indigent and to people whose drug or alcohol addictions may have masked a Medi-Cal eligible disability.

As a result of the ACA and Medi-Cal changes, we should see the following:

* An increase in coverage for mental health care benefits that were not previously covered by state or private insurance.
* An increase in the number of individuals covered by private insurance who previously were denied due to previously existing mental health conditions.
* An increase in coverage for individuals who previously could not afford mental health coverage and were not eligible for Medi-cal.

Unfortunately, we already see issues preventing individuals from receiving the affordable, accessible, mental health care coverage ACA and Medi-Cal expansion promise.

Parity Problems

In Rea v Blue Shield, lawyers for Rea argue that private health insurance wrongly denied Rea coverage for residential care for her eating disorder. There are many other lawsuits underway charging that private insurance companies are seeking to evade the parity mandate. We will locate these lawsuits, analyze the cases, and look for patterns in the coverage.

A [CHCF publication](http://www.chcf.org/publications/2014/08/physician-participation-medical#ixzz39vWLRwSx) has reported that “the ratio of primary care doctors participating in Medi-Cal was 35 to 49 FTEs per 100,000 enrollees, well short of the range of 60 to 80 that the federal government estimated are needed.” We plan to investigate the number of mental health providers available both through private insurance and Medi-Cal; preliminary research suggests the ratio is even smaller than that for primary care doctors, a significant problem since “[nearly 1 in 6 Californians has a mental health need](http://www.chcf.org/publications/2013/07/mental-health-california#ixzz39vXXEMxK).”

Uneven Medi-Cal Expansion

Local counties are each responsible for implementing Medi-Cal expansion. The Medi-Cal implemention is particularly important for the mental health care arena, as a [CHCF study](http://www.chcf.org/publications/2013/07/mental-health-california#ixzz39vXhmOGN) demonstrates that “the prevalence of serious mental illness varied by income, with much higher rates of mental illness at lower income levels.” We will zero in on a number of local counties, including Sacramento, Chico, and Santa Barbara, to better understand the local implementation of Medi-Cal.

**The Project**

The project is being conducted by the [Alternative News Foundation](http://www.altweeklies.com/aan/aan-foundation/Page), a 501c3 organization devoted to independent media, together with their sister association, the Association of Alternative Newsmedia, a 501c6 devoted to independent local media, and the [Media Consortium](http://www.themediaconsortium.org/), a 501c3 with a focus on independent national media. Participating news organizations will be drawn from both organizations.

Confirmed participants from the Alternative Newsmedia include the Sacramento News & Review, the Chico News & Review, the Santa Barbara Independent. We are waiting to hear from the East Bay Express, San Diego City Beat, and the North Coast Journal. Together, these papers represent counties across California, while the Sacramento paper can provide special access to and reporting on state legislators.

Confirmed participants from the Media Consortium include New America Media and Mother Jones. New America Media covers ethnic news, including many communities not reached by alternative newsmedia; in addition, NAM has a dedicated health reporter. Mother Jones provides national reach. We are also in talks with the LA Progressive and Oakland Local, two hyperlocal outlets that can provide reporting on Los Angeles and the Bay Area.

Reporters from the local outlets will investigate Medi-Cal expansion in their counties—a story that must be reported county by county--and will contribute reporting to the larger story about parity under the ACA in California. This local reporting will be pulled together by New America Media’s dedicated health care reporter into a feature story that will be published simultaneously across all outlets. Mother Jones will use the local outlets’ reporting to connect what’s happening in California to the national ACA story. Finally, we will hire a reporter to create data visualizations for the data our reporters are sure to produce.

The main parity story plus any sidebars the local outlets produce, along with the project’s data visualizations on MediCal expansion will be cross-promoted on Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr; we will host a tweet chat for our readers, as well as a conference call for interested health care policy experts and advocates in California and across the nation.

**The Goal: How this Project fits with CHCF’s Mission**

This grant request fits into CHCF’s Health Reform and Public Programs Initiative. Our goal, to use your language, is to “provide reliable, useful, and timely information and analysis” to the people and healthcare decision-makers of the state of California. The analysis in which we will be engaged is designed to “monitor the progress of state efforts to fulfill the requirements of the ACA.”

Mental health care is a critical element of the ACA, yet it has not been foregrounded in either policy studies or news reports since the ACA was passed. Our goal is to provide a snapshot and analysis of how well California is doing to ensure mental health care is affordable and accessible to all Californians.

**Time Table**

This project is timely; we would like to publish our results in mid-November, right after the election, so that policy makers turn immediately to the ACA as they begin planning for the new term. We can provide a detailed time table upon request.

**Amount Requested**

**$26, 500**

**Contact Info**

This collaboration is a project of the Alternative News Foundation, working jointly with the Association for Alternative Newsmedia and The Media Consortium. The project manager is Alternative News Foundation board member and Media Consortium executive director Jo Ellen Green Kaiser.

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