

**Delaware House of Representatives**

**Rep. Valerie Longhurst**

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**Bills Would Guarantee Coverage for Mental Health Visits,
Further Expand Services at Delaware Schools**

*Legislation aims to treat mental health the same as physical health,
lower ratios of students to school counselors*

DOVER – Lawmakers unveiled a series of bills Thursday that would collectively address mental health issues for Delaware children and adults through preventive measures such as annual wellness checks and more mental health practitioners in middle schools.

**House Majority Leader Valerie Longhurst** announced the three bills as a continuation of recent efforts to vastly improve mental health services available to Delawareans. A chief proposal would require Delaware health insurers to cover a yearly Behavioral Health Well Check for every insured person, putting mental health on par with other routinely covered preventive health services such as an annual physical or cancer screening.

Additional legislation from Rep. Longhurst would hire more mental health practitioners to serve in schools across the state and equip educators with a comprehensive mental health curriculum at all grade levels, building on a successful effort last year to expand mental health services available to Delaware children.

“We know that unaddressed trauma leads to lifelong mental health challenges, substance use disorders, as well as higher rates of incarceration and negative health behaviors, including suicide. Untreated mental health issues impact a person’s physical health and create costly outcomes over the course of their lifetime. These costs ripple throughout our health care system, our criminal justice system, and our economy at large,” said **Rep. Longhurst**, D-Bear.

“We encourage people all the time to get an annual physical, enroll in a diabetes prevention program, schedule a mammogram, see your gynecologist, get screened for colon cancer, the list goes on. These are all covered by insurance. Our mental health is just as important as our physical health.”

House Bill 303 would guarantee insurance coverage for an annual, pre-deductible visit with a licensed mental health clinician with at least a master’s degree. The Behavioral Health Well Check must include a review of medical history, evaluation of adverse childhood experiences and use of a validated mental health screening tool.

“We can’t begin to address the mental health crisis in this nation until we make sure everyone has access to affordable mental health services,” said **Sen. Nicole Poore**, prime Senate sponsor of HB 303. “This legislation takes a major step forward in that effort by making Behavioral Health Well Check as routine and accessible as an annual visit to your primary care doctor. I want to commend Rep. Longhurst for putting mental health at the center of her legislative agenda for the welfare of all Delawareans.”

Every dollar invested in mental health can yield up to 10 times the savings in health care, criminal and juvenile justice, and lost productivity, according to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

For example, an annual Behavioral Health Well Check could diagnose someone with mild depression, which can be treated with therapy. But severe depression that goes undetected could require longer term treatment, costly medication and even more intensive services.

“By adding a Behavioral Health Well Check to pre-deductible, preventative healthcare plans, we are telling people that mental health is a critical part of total body health,” said **Carolyn Petrak, associate executive director of the Ability Network of Delaware.** “With the passage of Behavioral Health Well Checks we can take a giant step towards true parity and give individuals and families the resources to prioritize mental health the same as the rest of their bodies. And by doing this, I wholeheartedly believe we will be taking a very significant step at destigmatizing the care of our mental well-being.”

“We know how imperative mental health services are for people of all ages. This legislation does what we know works best, moving things upstream from intervention to prevention. By reimbursing providers for visits before there is a major problem and allowing people to see mental health as part of preventive medicine, we can make a huge impact on the overall wellness of Delawareans,” said **Dr. Meghan Walls, legislative and policy advisor with Nemours Children’s Health**.

“I’m thrilled that Rep. Longhurst and Sen. Poore understand that, to see true progress, we need policy change across the spectrum, including prevention and integration of behavioral health and medicine. As a pediatric psychologist, I am so excited that we will be able to see children at their well visits and address concerns before they turn into crises.”

The other bills announced Thursday would continue to expand mental health services in Delaware schools. House Bill 300 would create new positions for school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists in all Delaware middle schools, effectively lowering the ratio of students to mental health practitioners. This bill, which comes during National School Counseling Week, builds on the successful passage last year of House Bill 100, which created a structure to place these practitioners in every elementary school statewide.

“We are in the midst of a mental health crisis in Delaware that began well before the pandemic and has only accelerated in the last two years. Anyone who has paid attention to this issue should be alarmed at the especially brutal toll this crisis has taken on our children,” said **Rep. Longhurst**. “Teachers across the state are seeing it every day in their classrooms. So many of their students come to school with significant unmet needs that impact their ability to learn, such as hunger, homelessness, trauma, and other untreated mental health issues. Without adequate resources to support our students, these challenges create the kind of disruptions in school that impact learning and affect all students.”

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, one in five youth are affected by a mental health disorder, and untreated mental illness has been shown to lead to increased risk of dropout, homelessness, substance abuse, chronic illnesses, incarceration, and possibly suicide. However, students with access to mental health services in school-based health centers are 10 times more likely to seek care for mental health or substance abuse than youth without access.

“I stood with Rep. Longhurst last year to help make sure each of our elementary schools have a meaningful support system in place to help young people dealing with real trauma and undiagnosed mental, behavioral and developmental disorders,” said **Sen. Marie Pinkney**, the Senate prime sponsor of HB 300. “This legislation continues what we started last year by providing the same support at the middle school level, where children are just beginning the transition into adulthood. Having school-based social workers, psychologists and mental health counselors at the ready will help our young people grapple with those challenges and develop the kinds of healthy coping skills that are just as important later in life as their classroom lessons.”

A companion measure, House Bill 301, would establish a statewide mental health educational curriculum for kindergarten through grade 12, tailored to the developmental needs of students at each grade level.

“Even before the pandemic, as many as one in 10 teens and children in this country was experiencing severe depression, while the teen suicide rate has increased by dramatically over the last decade,” said **Sen. Sarah McBride**, the chair of the Senate Health & Social Services Committee and the prime Senate sponsor of HB 301. “Sadly, far too many people never get treatment due to the pervasive stigmas around mental health. We can break that cycle once and for all by talking to our kids early and often about their mental health, and I commend Rep. Longhurst for leading the effort to establish a mental health curriculum, along with mental health services available directly in our schools.”

“Concerns for youth mental health were rising before COVID-19, but now, after nearly two years, the situation is dire. When the pandemic wanes, these concerns will likely continue. Providing developmentally-appropriate mental health education from K-12, ensuring access to mental health professionals in middle schools, and offering annual behavioral health wellness checks are sensible policies that will save lives,” said **Anne Slease, director of advocacy and education with the National Alliance on Mental Illness in Delaware**.

“NAMI Delaware applauds the continued leadership and tenacity of Rep. Longhurst as well as the support and commitment from Senators McBride and Pinkney in addressing youth mental health needs in the First State. We are grateful for their dedication to improving the lives of Delawareans through youth mental health policies focused on prevention and early intervention.”

“Too many of our children are suffering in silence with mental health issues. Too many of our children do not know where to turn to have an honest conversation about mental illness. The stigma is still too great. The darkness is too dark. I know this personally. My son Sean was everything you would want in a son; smart, a leader, a tremendous athlete, a friend to so many but for all of his amazing accomplishments he was not equipped to handle his depression and anxiety,” said **Chris Locke, co-founder of SL24: Unlocke the Light Foundation**, based in Newark.

“I as his father, we as a society did not teach him to ask for help, to seek help that he needed. Mandatory health education from age 5 to age 18 will substantially remove the stigma and will make it commonplace for us to have honest and open conversations about mental health issues. We need to do this so that our sons, our daughters, and the Seans in all of our lives do not suffer in silence anymore.”

House Bills 300, 301 and 303 are scheduled to be filed Friday.

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