



# Parent/Professional Advocacy League

## *The Massachusetts Family Voice for Children's Mental Health*

---

45 Bromfield Street, 10th Floor, Boston, Massachusetts 02108 617.542.7860 F: 617.542.7832 [www.ppal.net](http://www.ppal.net)

### **Testimony of Parent/Professional Advocacy League Joint Committee on Mental Health & Substance Abuse An Act Relative to Coordination of Children's Mental Health Care HB 3586/SB 757**

Good afternoon and many thanks to the committee for the opportunity to testify today on this important legislation. My name is Lisa Lambert and I am the director of an organization called PAL, the Parent/Professional Advocacy League. This legislation is important to many of us here today but it is especially important to parents and their children who have mental health needs.

Let me start by telling you a little bit about PAL. There are about 4,000 families involved in our network and 100% of them have children with mental health needs. Nearly all of them go to public school and more than half of them have private insurance, because one of their parents works and purchases insurance through their employer. At any given time, about 35% of our families are involved with DSS; many others receive services from DMH and a smaller group find themselves involved with the juvenile courts. And all our families are doing their best to get their children the mental health services that they need.

For most parents, learning about the mental health system for children and youth is a pretty arduous task. You have to learn about services you have never heard of before and try to figure out which ones will work for your child. And on top of all that, you have to learn a whole new vocabulary with words like IEPs and ARTs or people talk about "getting a script" or "finding a bed."

But most parents are pretty smart and they learn what they need to know in order to enter the world of children's mental health. And once they are in that world, they find out that there is an array of specialists to care for their child and no one passes information back and forth. So, they often do what makes sense – they take on the task of coordinating the information which in turn, coordinates the care. And it's an enormous burden which takes its toll on everyone and often makes parents feel pretty desperate.

More than 15 years ago, the Boston Public Health Commission took a look at the children's mental health in Boston. They looked at youth in emergency rooms, they looked at youth survey data and they talked to the people who worked with teens. And they found that children's mental health needed a number of fixes. One of the

recommendations they made was that we needed to begin a process to change our reimbursement policies so mental health providers could get paid for collateral services.

Quite a lot has changed in children's mental health since they did that study. But nothing has helped coordinate care for children with mental health needs who have commercial insurance. We still need to change our reimbursement policies to make coordinating care for children and youth a reality.

PAL is in the middle of a survey – along with the Central Mass Medical Home Project -- of parents about medical home and mental health. The early data shows that 88% of parents report that they are the ones responsible for communication between medical, mental health and non-physician providers as well the coordination of their child's care. That's almost 9 in 10 parents who are taking on the coordinating role.

As I mentioned earlier, most children in the Commonwealth have commercial insurance because their parents work and purchase it through their employer. And most of those parents are pretty happy with their health insurance until they begin to find out what their mental health benefit does and does not cover. They say they pay a lot each month to have the best health benefits they can. They would certainly be willing to pay the cost per member per month -- less than a dollar a year -- to get a benefit that will directly impact their child and family.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this very important legislation.

Submitted by: Lisa Lambert, Executive Director  
Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PAL)  
617.542.7860 x203  
[llambert@ppal.net](mailto:llambert@ppal.net)