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**For Information Contact:**

Eve Herold, 703-907-8640

[press@psych.org](mailto:press@psych.org)

Erin Connors, 703-907-8562

[econnors@psych.org](mailto:econnors@psych.org)

Justin Burke, 212-684-3365

[jburke@naminyc.org](mailto:jburke@naminyc.org)**Study of New York Parity Law Provides Lessons for Implementation of Federal Law  
*Consumers Indicate Need for Improved Communication from Health Plans***

**ARLINGTON, Va. (March 30, 2011)** – A study of consumer experiences after implementation of the New York State mental health parity law in 2007 found many consumers uninformed about the change in mental health care benefits. Barriers to access to mental health benefits and high-quality services identified in a qualitative study of consumers' experience in New York may provide lessons for implementation of the federal mental health parity legislation, passed in 2008.

The study, reported in a column in the April issue of *Psychiatric Services*, a journal of the American Psychiatric Association, found that few employees had accurate knowledge of the state's parity law provisions. Most had been informed of their insurance coverage benefits before the state parity law in 2007 but were not aware of the extended coverage as a result of the law.

Researchers at the National Alliance on Mental Illness of New York City (NAMI-NYC Metro) conducted telephone interviews with 54 employed individuals with private insurance coverage by phone, including 32 adults with mental illness and 22 parents of children with mental illness. Researchers identified recurrent themes among the responses, including:

- Unclear or incomplete information in health plans' written and verbal communication;
- Difficulty getting information on mental health benefits compared to general medical/surgical benefits;
- Difficulty finding a high-quality mental health care provider in health plan network;
- More aggressive management of mental health care benefits than medical-surgical benefits; and
- Problems with health plan provider lists, e.g., including providers no longer accepting the insurance and long waits for appointments.

“After a decade-long fight to end the discriminatory design and administration of mental health benefits, our study underscores the need for comprehensive education programs and effective oversight to ensure access to quality mental health treatment,” said Wendy Brennan, executive director of NAMI-NYC Metro.

Forty-nine states have passed mental health care parity legislation. The state laws vary in the size of companies covered, the range of diagnosis covered, and the mandated level of mental health coverage. The New York law, effective in 2007, requires all companies that issue health insurance to provide a minimum mental health benefit to all members and requires that cost-sharing requirements for mental health benefits be the same as general medical-surgical coverage.

Findings “indicate an urgent need for benefits education and monitoring of health plan communications on a federal level,” according to the study authors. The authors also pointed to the broader issue of the shortage of mental health providers, especially for children, as an area of concern nationally.

The study was led by Vera Oziransky, M.P.H., former director of research and advocacy at NAMI-NYC Metro.

The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society whose physician members specialize in the diagnosis, treatment, prevention, and research of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. Visit the APA at [www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org) and [www.HealthyMinds.org](http://www.HealthyMinds.org).

The National Alliance on Mental Illness of New York City Metro is a grassroots organization that provides support, education and advocacy for families and individuals of all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds who live with mental illness. For more information, visit [www.naminycmetro.org](http://www.naminycmetro.org).

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