

Study: Calif. mental patients force to wait past limit

By [Kelly Kennedy](#), USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – Mental health patients in California are often forced to wait for care beyond the 10-day limit required by state law, which is a troubling sign for the 2010 federal health care law's requirement to treat mental health patients in the same way as those suffering from other ailments, a survey of providers shows.

A survey of 305 mental health providers at 57 California [Kaiser Permanente](#) facilities found that mental health patients do not receive needed care in a timely manner, that managers ask employees to "cook the books" so it appears they meet a California law for an initial appointment within 10 days, that patients are funneled into group therapy because there are not enough clinicians for one-on-one care and that clinicians do not have time to perform basic assessments.

The survey was conducted by the National Union of Healthcare Workers.

The California findings are troubling for the nation because the federal health law requires insurers to pay for mental health issues as they would for any standard health issue, often referred to as parity.

Staffing has "always been a problem," but recent parity laws have made it worse, said Clement Papazian, a Kaiser Permanente licensed clinical social worker out of Oakland, where the organization is based.

That doesn't surprise Patrick Gauthier, director of AHP Healthcare Solutions, a research group that looks at behavioral health. He said that the problem is growing across the nation and that it will continue to grow until "parity" is better defined: what treatments should be covered and who can — or should — provide them. Even so, he said, until mental health care is integrated into the health system — rather than appearing as an extra service — it will be easier for plans to cut costs there.

According to the California survey, more than half of clinicians said their next available appointment was more than 10 business days away, and more than 65% said return appointments took longer than 10 days.

The California Psychological Association released a statement saying its members were "deeply troubled" because "if true, the care of the patient is being compromised." Don Mordecai, the regional director of mental health and chemical dependency services for Kaiser Permanente in Northern California said his clinicians "provide timely access to high-quality mental health care for our members."

"The survey information described to us does not align in any way with our own data, nor with independent evaluations of our services," he said.

<http://yourlife.usatoday.com/health/medical/mentalhealth/story/2011-11-13/Study-Calif-mental-patients-force-to-wait-past-limit/51189420/1>

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