

Statement from Sun Life U.S. President, Dan Fishbein, M.D., on the ERISA Advisory Council's recommendation to Congress

WELLESLEY, Mass., Dec. 12, 2023 /PRNewswire/ -- Today, Dan Fishbein, M.D., president of Sun Life U.S., released the following statement regarding the ERISA Advisory Council's recommendation that Congress pass legislation to require mental health parity in long-term disability insurance.

"Mental health is health, unequivocally. Just as with physical conditions, mental health conditions can render a person unable to work. Disability insurance offers a level of income protection when someone cannot work due to illness or injury – but by tradition in the U.S. has typically only covered mental health conditions for two years, depending on the policy. The ERISA Advisory Council today has recommended that Congress pass legislation to ensure mental health parity in disability insurance, which is already the case for health insurance. As one of North America's largest disability insurers, we support this important change. Mental health conditions should be covered by long-term disability in the same way that physical conditions are. We encourage Congress to take up and pass appropriate legislation to make this happen.

The obvious question is why disability insurers don't just do this on their own. Any one company introducing this approach without a market-wide solution would immediately be uncompetitive. A legislative solution is therefore the best option, ensuring an equitable approach for all covered workers, while supporting a strong and sustainable market for disability insurance.

Another key issue is the cost impact. While some have expressed concerns that employers won't be able to afford the added cost of full mental health coverage and will stop offering disability insurance to their employees as a result, we don't believe this will be the case. Employers rightly recognize disability insurance as a valuable employee benefit that workers expect and rely on. If all disability carriers provided mental health parity, the additional cost would be relatively modest. Plus, disability insurers bring significant resources to manage the cost, especially by helping people get back to health and back to work.

There is a mental health crisis in America. Benefits designed 75 years ago and continued as a market tradition do not reflect today's reality. We encourage others to join us in supporting efforts to evolve disability coverage to meet the current needs of American workers. We must do the right thing and ensure we are covering the conditions that need to be covered, so that workers can get the support and assistance they need. Getting people back to health and back to work whenever possible remains the goal, and providing good mental health benefits to bridge people through times when they can't work is a good investment.

We applaud the ERISA Advisory Council's recommendation and stand ready to work with members of Congress and other partners to support appropriate legislation. Society benefits by helping more workers get the mental healthcare they need, and Congress and the industry have the opportunity to do just that."