

Summary of Testimony For HB 1273

My name is E.J. Barklage. I live in Castle Rock. I am the executive director of Karis Community. Karis Community is a mental health agency that has been serving the Denver metropolitan community for 33 years. The mission of Karis Community is "To provide a transitional community living opportunity for restoring basic life skills and improving the social well-being of individuals recovering from serious and persistent mental illness."

House Bill 1273, Colorado Guaranteed Health Care Act is important to me as a mental health professional and tax payer of Colorado. A staggering 50% of the clients we serve at Karis Community are un/under insured. Our clients are labeled "the have-nots" when it comes to receiving appropriate health care. I have sat in doctors' offices and emergency rooms in hospitals and have observed the poor treatment they received because they are un/under insured. Un/under insured individuals who have a serious and persistent mental illness experience shortened hospital stays. The result is an increase of re-hospitalizations for the mental health patient, and increased expenses taken on by the hospitals and doctors, which are passed on to the tax payers. Health insurance premiums for the insured increase. The un/under insured are stripped of dignity.

We also have a shortage of psychiatrists in the Denver area. Psychiatrists will not see individuals who are un/under insured. This creates an even greater strain on our community mental health centers that are under staffed and are already experiencing a case load of 60 to 70 people per therapist. I am told that the Mental Health Center of Denver receives an average of 17 new referrals a week for individuals who have no health insurance. They are able to take only one of these 17 referrals on as a client. This leads to an increased burden on Stout Street Clinic which already cannot adequately serve existing clients. What does this lead to? An increase in people using emergency rooms for medication treatment, sky rocketing costs for hospitals because of the un/under insured, which then are passed on to the tax payer. Homelessness and un/under insured people marginalized increases in our community.

Colorado Guaranteed Health Care Act, HB 1273 will address this crisis by providing comprehensive medical benefits and a choice of primary care providers and medical providers for all. It will also underline the importance of quality and patient safety with incentive for improved health care outcomes. All Coloradans deserve to have access to affordable health care!