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July 5, 2022

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Rep. Kane named to mental health bill conference committee

BOSTON – House Minority Leader Bradley H. Jones, Jr. (R-North Reading) has appointed State Representative Hannah Kane (R-Shrewsbury) to a six-member conference committee focused on addressing mental health issues.

The House of Representatives recently engrossed House Bill 4891, *An Act addressing barriers to care for mental health*, which seeks to improve access to mental health services and establish insurance parity between behavioral and physical health care coverage. The Senate approved its own version of the bill, Senate Bill 2584, last November.

Both the House and Senate bills would require insurers to provide coverage for annual mental health wellness exams and would take steps to prevent the practice known as “boarding” by creating an online portal to help health care providers identify open beds for minors and adults in need of mental health and substance use services. Currently, patients with acute mental health needs often have to wait an extended period of time in a hospital emergency room before they can secure a psychiatric inpatient bed. The Massachusetts Health and Hospital Association, which tracks boarding statistics, found that last month there were 660 behavioral health patients, including 156 pediatric patients, boarding at 53 hospitals.

There are a number of differences between the two bills, however. For example, the House bill would establish a student stakeholder advisory commission on mental health whose members will work with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to develop and implement school-based programs to promote student mental health and well-being, but the language is not included in the Senate bill. The Senate bill also contains provisions creating a new state Office of Behavioral Health Promotion, which is not included in the House version.

“As a member of the Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use, and Recovery, Hannah is well-versed on the many policy issues contained in the legislation the conference committee is now reviewing,” said Representative Jones. “Her insight and input will be invaluable as the conferees work to resolve the differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill.”

The conference committee, which convened for its first meeting on June 30, will now attempt to negotiate a compromise bill that can be sent to Governor Charlie Baker before the end of formal

sessions on July 31. Joining Kane on the conference committee are Representatives Adrian Madaro (D-East Boston) and Denise Garlick (D-Needham), as well as Senators Julian Cyr (D-Truro), Cindy Friedman (D-Arlington) and Bruce Tarr (R-Gloucester).

Representative Kane is currently the Ranking Minority Member of both the Joint Committee on Public Health and the Joint Committee on Health Care Financing. In addition to serving on the Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use and Recovery, she is also a member of the Joint Committee on Racial Equity, Civil Rights and Inclusion.

First elected to the House of Representatives in 2015, Kane represents the Eleventh Worcester District, which is comprised of the town of Shrewsbury and precincts 4 and 5 in Westborough.

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