

## House overwhelmingly approves mental health reform bill

By Brianna Ehley

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The House on Wednesday overwhelmingly passed long-awaited bipartisan mental health reform legislation more than three years in the making.

Republicans opposed to new gun control measures have previously touted the legislation - which was approved 422-2 - as their response to mass shootings. But about two weeks after Democrats staged a House sit-in over guns, Republicans and Democrats avoided the issue during floor speeches ahead of the vote on the bipartisan mental health bill.

The measure was originally intended as a massive overhaul of the mental health care system. However, it was watered down in committee and stripped of costly and controversial provisions, including some that would have expanded access to psychiatric hospital beds and made it easier for doctors to share information about mentally ill patients.

The pared-down, budget-neutral bill authorizes new prevention and treatment programs, reauthorizes existing ones, restructures leadership at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and requires insurers to provide more robust coverage for eating disorders.

Although bill sponsor Rep. [Tim Murphy](#) acknowledged that he hoped for more robust legislation, he still called it a landmark accomplishment that "lays the foundation for how we should handle prevention and treatment."

There's broad agreement that the bill is now a starting point for reform, while Democrats have insisted more money is needed to support an underfunded mental health care system. The newly approved bill is a "hollow promise without any money in it," Rep. [Jim McDermott](#) (D-Wash.) said on the House floor.

One of the most significant reform proposals dropped from the bill would have cost between \$40 billion and \$60 billion over a decade. The original bill would have struck a decades-old federal rule prohibiting Medicaid payments to psychiatric hospitals with more than 16 beds. Advocates say the rule is a serious barrier to care that has significantly reduced the number of psychiatric beds in the country.

Murphy said he hopes lawmakers can secure more funding for mental health through the appropriations process.

Still, lawmakers and advocates are touting the bill's passage as a rare bipartisan victory against the backdrop of an ongoing political battle over gun legislation.

The bill, originally drafted in the aftermath of the 2012 Sandy Hook school massacre, was held up in the Energy and Commerce Committee for more than three years. It was stalled over partisan disagreements about cost and provisions dealing with patient privacy laws and assisted outpatient treatment programs.

But Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman [Fred Upton](#) revised it earlier this year to eliminate the most contentious provisions. It was unanimously approved by the committee last month.

Murphy hopes the Senate will quickly take up his bill, but a shrinking legislative calendar and partisan squabbles in that chamber could hold up the legislation.

A companion measure that was approved unanimously out of the Senate HELP Committee earlier this year has stalled over gun politics. Chairman [Lamar Alexander](#) says he is hopeful the Senate will take up that measure in September.

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