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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/advocates-lobby-to-protect-obamacare-coverage-for-substance-abuse-treatment-1484316000>

U.S.

# Push to Protect Addiction Treatment Under Health Law Is Primed

Lobbying effort aimed at Republican legislators in states hit hard by the opioid crisis



Widespread abuse of opioids has hit many states in Appalachia and the Northeast particularly hard. Above, a group-therapy session at a substance-abuse treatment center in Westborough, Mass.

PHOTO: JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

By [Jeanne Whalen](#)

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Advocates for substance-abuse treatment are hoping to protect the insurance coverage provided by the [Affordable Care Act](#) by lobbying Republican legislators in states hit hard by the opioid-addiction crisis.

The advocacy groups aim to “start educating legislators” on how [a repeal of the ACA](#), without a replacement plan to preserve coverage, would undermine efforts to address [a public-health crisis](#) that has become a major political issue, according to Gary Mendell, founder of Shatterproof, a New York-based nonprofit that lobbies for legislation to fight addiction.

Shatterproof, which plans to spend \$300,000 on the campaign, is working alongside the National Council for Behavioral Health, a Washington, D.C., organization that represents

the interests of 2,800 providers of mental health and addiction treatment.

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## THE OPIOID CRISIS

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Continuing coverage of how synthetic painkillers became a global menace

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[Fentanyl Billionaire Comes Under Fire as Death Toll Mounts From Prescription Opioids](#)

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Widespread abuse of powerful opioids, such as heroin, fentanyl and prescription painkillers, has pushed overdose death rates in the U.S. to all-time highs, hitting many states in Appalachia and the Northeast particularly hard.

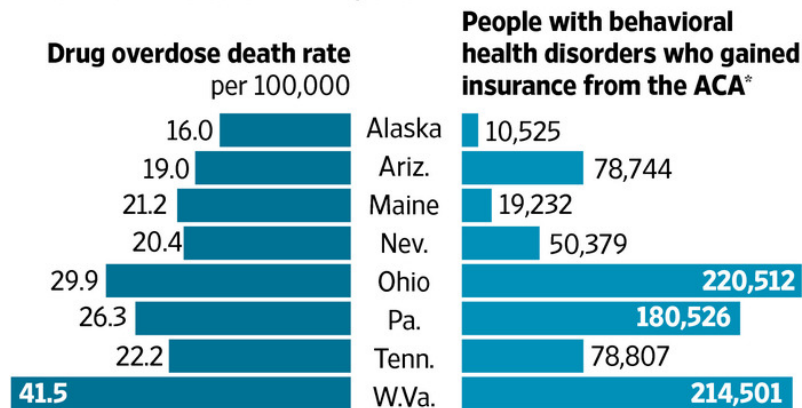
The ACA increased access to substance-abuse treatment in several ways, including by giving states federal funds to expand health-care coverage under Medicaid, the insurance program for low-income Americans. Even before the ACA, Medicaid was the largest source of funding in the U.S. for mental-health care, including substance-abuse treatment, according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The ACA also helped other Americans buy insurance through government-run exchanges and required that these insurance plans cover certain “essential health benefits,” including substance-abuse treatment.

The lobbying effort plans to focus on Republican legislators in eight states identified by researchers at Harvard Medical School and New York University as having experienced high opioid-addiction rates and wide expansion of insurance coverage under the ACA: West Virginia, Maine, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Ohio, Nevada, Alaska and Arizona.

## Coverage Dilemma

Some states with high drug overdose death rates could lose broad insurance coverage for mental-health and substance-abuse disorders if the Affordable Care Act is repealed.



\*Figures include people who gained insurance through Medicaid expansion or the ACA marketplaces.

Sources: Harvard Medical School; New York University

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Those states are likely to get hit hard if the ACA is repealed without a comparable replacement plan, Mr. Mendell said.

The researchers published data this week estimating that 2.8 million Americans with substance-abuse disorders would lose some or all of their insurance if the ACA is repealed. They said about 220,000 of these are addicted to opioids.

The researchers estimated a repeal would withdraw at least \$5.5 billion annually from treatment of mental-health conditions, including substance abuse. A group of Democratic senators issued a press release promoting the research and warning that an ACA repeal would “pull the rug out from under” efforts to combat opioid addiction.

In an email this week, the National Council for Behavioral Health asked the treatment providers it represents to write their members of Congress to oppose an ACA repeal. The email included a letter template asking legislators to “protect our nation’s most vulnerable patient population and preserve their access to treatment.”

Linda Rosenberg, CEO of the council, said the group also will target Republican senators who have been outspoken about the need to address the opioid crisis, including Rob Portman of Ohio and Roy Blunt of Missouri.

“The skyrocketing costs of Obamacare are hurting families and small businesses all across Ohio,” Mr. Portman’s spokesman said in an email Thursday. “Senator Portman is committed to ensuring there is a smooth transition for all Ohioans to a better health-care

system that also addresses key concerns about opioid addiction, mental health care, and other important issues.”

Mr. Blunt said in an email statement: “The Affordable Care Act did not live up to its promises, including the promise of affordable coverage. As chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee that funds opioid treatment and prevention programs, I fought to successfully increase funding to combat the opioid epidemic.”

He added, “I will continue to work on a replacement plan that prioritizes access to treatment and prevention programs.”

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