



Graduate Employees' Organization

Representing Graduate Student Workers at the University of Michigan since 1974

NEWS RELEASE

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University of Michigan Expands Transgender Health Coverage After Graduate Union Campaign

Union-Led Campaign Helps Expand Coverage for U-M Community

ANN ARBOR, MI—After a years-long campaign by the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) to expand healthcare coverage for transgender members, University of Michigan (U-M) health plans will expand to cover new procedures to treat gender dysphoria.

U-M health plans will cover facial feminization procedures, Adam's apple reduction and facial hair removal procedures with a \$30,000 lifetime plan maximum. New coverage will apply not only to graduate students, but will be available to anyone with a U-M health plan. This expansion in transgender health care is historic. Based on conversations with the University, and to the best of our knowledge, it is our understanding that this is the first time a public institution has extended coverage for these procedures. New coverage will begin on July 1, 2019.

"We could not be happier to hear that U-M and Blue Cross Blue Shield have finally come around to see the trans community's perspective. Transition coverage is medically necessary, and it's incredibly rewarding to see people's minds change so much on this matter," explained Monica Lewis, chair of GEO's Trans Health Caucus; "We are excited to continue our advocacy work. Other medically necessary procedures remain excluded, but we hope to come to a similar point of understanding about how the current coverage still fails to meet the needs of trans people in many ways."

GEO has a long history of advocating for improvements to transgender healthcare. In 2005, GEO proposed coverage for many procedures, including Facial Feminization Surgery (FFS) and Permanent Hair Removal, and the University denied both at the time. The conversation that led to this most recent extension of trans benefits started in GEO's 2016-17 contract campaign. The union brought forward a number of proposals related to trans health equity during bargaining, with little progress. After the GEO membership authorized a walkout, the University responded with significant movement on many of their demands, including an

agreement to hold a series of “special conferences” to discuss the coverage and accessibility of treatment services related to gender dysphoria. The walkout was called off and the GEO membership ratified the new contract, signed in May 2017. The first meeting of the special conference series on transgender healthcare was in December 2017, and there have been three more to date (the most recent of which was in January 2019).

GEO laid out our recommendations for new coverage to the University in an April 2018 conference. The items we brought forward were 1) FFS, 2) Permanent Hair Removal, 3) Fertility Preservation Services, 4) Speech Language Therapy, and 5) Transfeminine Top Surgery (aka augmentation mammoplasty) [please note that the term Male-to-Female, or MtF, is considered outdated and exclusionary]. A review of coverage was initiated by the University’s Medical Benefits Advisory Committee (MBAC), with its first meeting held in June 2018. The MBAC meetings were closed to the public, information about the proceedings was withheld, and GEO was not permitted to attend. GEO’s requests to interface with the panel were denied.

GEO organizers presented the University with a comprehensive 20-page document that reviewed the current medical literature for each procedure individually and presented the case that they each met the medical necessity criteria for coverage under U-M insurance plans. This research was given to MBAC in September 2018 and discussed by their panel later that same month.

The inclusion of trans voices in the review process was a central goal for GEO organizers, though requests for open MBAC forums were denied twice. GEO responded by submitting a FOIA request for logistical information about the MBAC panel, rallying membership, and sending the panel members a petition with 419 signatures (including signatures from physicians who work with trans patients). The University responded by allowing trans people to discuss their concerns with the MBAC chair and the Associate VP of Human Resources. This forum was held in January 2019. Besides the trans individuals who came to speak, over 80 GEO members came to Wolverine tower and stood outside the conference room in a show of support.

It was after this years-long push by GEO organizers that the U-M announced its expansion of coverage for transition health services. Even as an important step toward trans health equity, GEO and its Trans Health Committee, continue to work toward coverage of essential procedures that remain uncovered. Moreover, the requirements for accessing covered procedures remain a source of inequity in health coverage that GEO organizers seek to address.

Lewis explains, “Two of the items we brought forward remain excluded. Namely, Speech Language Therapy and Transfeminine Top Surgery (augmentation mammoplasty) are not covered for transgender employees on any U-M health plan, even after this extension. Additionally, in order to access this coverage, transgender patients are required to submit themselves to mandatory psychiatric evaluation (with either one or two therapists, depending on the procedure) and to an extended, unnecessary waiting period. These barriers obstruct medically necessary healthcare in a way that many trans people, myself included, find invasive, dehumanizing, and profoundly condescending.”

About GEO:

Founded in 1974, GEO is a labor union representing Graduate Student Instructors and Graduate Student Staff Assistants at the University of Michigan. GEO is local 3550 of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO.

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