

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 15, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515


Dear Leader McConnell and Leader Schumer:

We are writing to urge you to include significant new investments in behavioral health care in the next legislation to address the COVID-19 pandemic. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (P.L. 116-136) included just \$425 million in federal emergency discretionary funds for mental health and addiction treatment, which falls far short of what is needed to meet the growing needs of our communities. The Senate must ensure that those with mental illness and addiction are not left behind in this pandemic.

Prior to COVID-19, one in every five people suffered from a mental illness or substance use disorder, and the pandemic is expected to significantly increase the need for behavioral health care across the country. A recent poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that nearly half of Americans say that worry and stress related to the pandemic are hurting their mental health. A federal emergency hotline for people in emotional distress registered a more than 1,000 percent increase in calls in April compared to last year. A report released this month estimated 75,000 Americans could die from suicide or drug and alcohol misuse as a result of the pandemic. Additionally, our doctors, nurses, and other frontline workers are at an increased risk for developing mental illness, including post-traumatic stress syndrome.

At a time when we need to be increasing access to mental health and addiction treatment, we are seeing the opposite, as longstanding weaknesses in our behavioral health funding system are exposed. A recent nationwide survey by the National Council for Behavioral Health found that nearly all (92.6%) of Community Behavioral Health Organizations nationwide have been forced to reduce their operations, and nearly two out of three centers believe that they can survive financially for only three months or less under current conditions. Without widely available community based care, Americans in crisis could overwhelm hospital emergency rooms or lose their lives.

We simply cannot afford to ignore this behavioral health crisis. With the right investments in behavioral health care, we believe that this country will meet the increased behavioral health needs during this challenging time and help millions of Americans recover. We urge you to commit to comprehensively addressing the challenges our communities face, including but certainly not limited to:

- Providing robust funding to ensure community behavioral health centers and other mental health and addiction treatment providers can serve patients. Many national behavioral health organizations have said that the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic demands \$38.5 billion in emergency funding to meet the increased needs.
- Ensuring strong support from existing and future funds through the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund (PHSSEF). Behavioral health treatment providers have been largely left behind in the allocations of the fund to date.
- Ensuring telehealth parity for behavioral health services. Telehealth is a lifeline for behavioral health clinicians 

- Ensuring telehealth parity for behavioral health services. Telehealth is a lifeline for behavioral health clinicians and their patients. To ensure access to needed behavioral health care during the pandemic, telehealth services, including audio-only services where appropriate, should be paid at the same rate as face-to-face visits. Congress must also ensure patients and providers have access to the technology they need.
- Providing additional personal protective equipment. Behavioral health providers need equipment including masks and gloves to keep themselves and their patients safe.
- Fully funding Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs). With additional federal support, CCBHCs can help meet the tremendous increased need. Congress should fund the nine additional states that have previously applied for the CCBHC Demonstration Program. Congress should also provide additional funding for community clinics around the country that are seeking start-up funding.
- Providing additional funding for behavioral health research.

We look forward to working with you to ensure that Americans can get the behavioral health care they need during this challenging time.

Sincerely,

/s/ Debbie Stabenow
Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

/s/ Tammy Baldwin
Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

/s/ Benjamin L. Cardin
Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

/s/ Tina Smith
Tina Smith
United States Senator

/s/ Richard Blumenthal
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/ Catherine Cortez Masto
Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator

/s/ Tom Udall
Tom Udall
United States Senator

/s/ Sherrod Brown
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/ Thomas R. Carper
Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator

/s/ Jack Reed
Jack Reed
United States Senator

/s/ Elizabeth Warren
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

/s/ Dianne Feinstein
Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

/s/ Gary C. Peters
Gary C. Peters
United States Senator

/s/ Kamala D. Harris
Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

/s/ Jeffrey A. Merkley
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/s/ Amy Klobuchar
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

/s/ Margaret Wood Hassan
Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator

/s/ Jacky Rosen
Jacky Rosen
United States Senator

/s/ Christopher A. Coons
Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator

ⁱ <https://www.kff.org/health-reform/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/05/04/mental-health-coronavirus/>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://wellbeingtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/WBT_Deaths-of-Despair_COVID-19-FINAL-FINAL.pdf

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