

May 4, 2020

The Honorable James Inhofe  
Chairman  
Senate Armed Services Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jack Reed  
Ranking Member  
Senate Armed Services Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Adam Smith  
Chairman  
House Armed Services Committee  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mac Thornberry  
Ranking Member  
House Armed Services Committee  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Inhofe, Ranking Member Reed, Chairman Smith, and Ranking Member Thornberry,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, thank you for your leadership throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure our armed services are equipped with the resources they need to prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19. Along this same vein, we urge you implement measures in the 4<sup>th</sup> COVID-19 legislative package requiring the Department of Defense's Defense Health Agency (DHA) to temporarily loosen telehealth restrictions under TRICARE, including coverage of outpatient telemental health services, such as partial hospitalization programs (PHPs), and ensure payment parity for telehealth visits.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the increased use of telehealth services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as an alternative to face-to-face interactions in order to limit the transmission of the virus, protect the health of patients and healthcare professionals, and reduce the hospital admission surge.<sup>1</sup> In the recent "Guidance for Outpatient and Ambulatory Care Settings", the CDC suggests the use of telemedicine to triage, assess, and care for patients for the purpose of preserving staff, personal protective equipment (PPE), and patient care supplies.<sup>2</sup>

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has already taken steps to expand the availability of telehealth services during this pandemic. Typically, Medicare only permits telehealth on a limited basis, particularly when the person receiving care lived in a designated rural area or accessed telehealth services at a clinic, hospital, or other approved medical facility. Recent guidance from CMS substantially loosened restrictions surrounding telehealth services through section 1135 waiver authority and the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations (CARES) Act, permitting Medicare to cover telehealth office, hospital, and other healthcare visits, including mental health counseling.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, studies of past pandemics show that children and adolescents experience high levels of stress and anxiety as a result of mitigation strategies designed to address public health crises.<sup>4</sup> This is especially relevant for children of servicemembers, who are already more susceptible to mental health challenges, with one study on secondary school students from military families reporting that 30 percent of participants reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks during the past 12 months and nearly one in four reported having

<sup>1</sup> Interim Guidance for Healthcare Facilities: Preparing for Community Transmission of COVID-19 in the United States. (2020). Retrieved 14 April 2020, from [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-hcf.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fhealthcare-facilities%2Fguidance-hcf.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-hcf.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fhealthcare-facilities%2Fguidance-hcf.html)

<sup>2</sup> Outpatient and Ambulatory Care Settings: Responding to Community Transmission of COVID-19 in the United States. (2020). Retrieved 14 April 2020, from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/ambulatory-care-settings.html>

<sup>3</sup> Medicare Telemedicine Health Care Provider Fact Sheet. (2020). Retrieved 14 April 2020, from <https://www.cms.gov/newsroom/fact-sheets/medicare-telemedicine-health-care-provider-fact-sheet>

<sup>4</sup> Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. Mental health and behavioral guidelines for response to a pandemic flu outbreak. Available at: <http://www.usuhs.mil/psy/CSTSPandemicAvianInfluenza.pdf>. Accessed April 14, 2009.

considered suicide.<sup>5</sup> Seeing as suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24<sup>6</sup>, action is needed to ensure this particularly vulnerable segment of the population is able to access telemental health services.

We urge you to include provisions in the 4<sup>th</sup> COVID-19 legislative package, similar to those enacted by CMS, requiring DHA to loosen telehealth restrictions under TRICARE for all levels of care, while ensuring payment parity for telehealth services. Servicemembers and their families deserve access to the safest care at minimum to the same level as the civilian population, and right now that means access to telehealth services.

Sincerely,

2020 Mom	Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry	International OCD Foundation
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy	(The) Jewish Federation of North America
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work	(The) Kennedy Forum
American Association of Suicidology	Mental Health America
American Association on Health and Disability	NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals
American Counseling Association	National Association of County Behavioral Health & Developmental Disability Directors
American Dance Therapy Association	National Alliance on Mental Illness
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention	National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
American Psychological Association	National Association for Rural Mental Health
American Mental Health Counselors Association	National Association of Social Workers
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare	National Eating Disorders Association
Centerstone	National Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health (NFFCMH)
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder	National League for Nursing
Children’s Hospital Association	Postpartum Support International

<sup>5</sup> Cederbaum, J., Gilreath, T., Benbenishty, R., Astor, R., Pineda, D., & DePedro, K. et al. (2014). Well-Being and Suicidal Ideation of Secondary School Students From Military Families. *Journal Of Adolescent Health, 54*(6), 672-677. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.09.006

<sup>6</sup> Ten Leading Causes of Death and Injury Charts, Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/LeadingCauses.html>

Clinical Social Work Association

College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists

Confederation of Independent Psychoanalytic Societies

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy &  
Action

Residential Eating Disorders Consortium

Sandy Hook Promise

SMART Recovery

The Trevor Project

Treatment Communities of America