

September 29, 2021

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer and Speaker Pelosi:

On behalf of the Mental Health Liaison Group, a coalition of national organizations representing mental health and addiction providers, individuals affected by mental health and substance use disorders, family members, advocates and other stakeholders committed to strengthening Americans' access to mental health and addiction care, we express our deep appreciation for your strong leadership and the historic investments to the nation's healthcare safety net in the Build Back Better legislation. We especially appreciate the investments that will significantly strengthen American's access to mental health services, substance use treatment, and crisis response. We also applaud the initiatives in the legislation that address health disparities, such as with the intersection of maternal health mortality and behavioral health.

We, therefore, support the provisions included in the legislation that expand access to health care and make it more affordable, including for individuals with mental health and substance use conditions. These include both the measures that reduce the cost-sharing burden for individuals purchasing health coverage through the exchange and the restriction against using funds to promote non-compliant plans (e.g., association health plans or short-term limited duration health plans) that do not cover mental health services and supports.

We applaud the Committee's inclusion of the bipartisan, bicameral Medicaid Reentry Act (S. 285/H.R. 955) that will reduce the burden on corrections systems and allow thousands of incarcerated individuals to enroll in Medicaid during the 30-day pre-release period. More than half of people in the criminal justice system have a mental illness. Of those with serious mental illness, approximately 75 percent also have a co-occurring substance use disorder. Successful reentry into the community requires timely access to addiction, mental health, and other health-related services before release.

MHLG also supports the investment in the community-based care infrastructure for mental health and substance use care. Specifically, we applaud the appropriation of \$75 million for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. This investment will advance the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline program to expand existing capabilities to bolster crisis response and provide critical resources as it transitions to 9-8-8 on July 16, 2022.

In addition, we strongly support the inclusion of multiple initiatives to stabilize health coverage for millions of low-income children. Specifically, we applaud the permanent authorization of CHIP and one year of continuous eligibility for children covered by Medicaid and CHIP. Forty-three million children rely on Medicaid and CHIP to access mental health and other services and Medicaid is the largest payer in the nation for mental health. As has been widely

reported, rates of mental illness among children have been escalating for years, but they have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Medicaid-CHIP healthcare safety net is a lifeline for many. Moreover, access to health care improves children's health and well-being, and results in more efficient healthcare spending over the long-term as we launch children on a path to lifelong health.

Similarly, we strongly support the measures to permanently ensure that all pregnant women on Medicaid and CHIP retain their health coverage during the critical first post-partum year, as well as the additional public health investments included in the bill to reduce disparities in maternal health outcomes, strengthen the maternal health workforce, and improve new mothers' mental health. Maternal mental health conditions are serious illnesses affecting 1 in 5 mothers. However, mothers of color suffer a disproportionate burden in part due to higher degrees of stress and lower levels of economic stability and are less likely to receive treatment for maternal mental health conditions that may have long-standing effects on their children. This investment will help support moms with and at risk of maternal mental health conditions with a focus on mothers of color, close racial health disparities, and diversify the maternal behavioral health care workforce.

Further, we support the investment in public health approaches to reducing community violence and trauma. Acknowledging the impact of multiple stressors such as COVID-19 and community violence, we recognize the need to serve communities through the person-centered, trauma-informed (PCTI) framework. The PCTI approach recognizes the impact of trauma and sets programs and policies to make people feel safe and empowered. Trauma affects people throughout the lifespan, and older adults such as minorities, veterans, refugees, or former first responders may be particularly vulnerable to re-traumatization by current events.

We also support the provision in the legislation that would give the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) the power to assess civil monetary penalties for violations of the Federal Parity Act and the investment of \$195 million over five years for the Employee Benefits Security Administration (EBSA) for enforcement.

Finally, we support the inclusion of funding for Medicaid Home- and Community-Based Services (HCBS) – which includes behavioral health services -- promised by the Better Care Better Jobs Act. With this investment, this chronically under-resourced sector will be able to increase access to care for the more than 800,000 individuals with disabilities and older adults who remain on long waiting lists for services across the country. We recommend that peer specialists be included as direct care workers. We also commend the inclusion of the measure to make Medicaid's Money Follows the Person program and the Protection Against Spousal Impoverishment permanent. As a result of this comprehensive approach, millions of Americans with significant care needs will be able to live their lives with greater dignity and independence.

Together, these and other vital measures included in the Reconciliation legislation represent the most significant investments in the nation's healthcare safety net, particularly for millions of low-income Americans, in decades.

Sincerely,

2020 Mom

American Association on Health and Disability

American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

American Counseling Association

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

American Mental Health Counselors Association

American Nurses Association

American Psychiatric Association

American Psychological Association

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare

Child and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Clinical Social Work Association

College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action

First Focus Campaign for Children

Global Alliance for Behavioral Health & Social Justice

International OCD Foundation

International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses

The Jewish Federations of North America

Lakeshore Foundation

Legal Action Center

Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance

NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals

National Alliance on Mental Illness

National Alliance to End Homelessness

National Association for Behavioral Healthcare

National Association for Children's Behavioral Health

National Association for Rural Mental Health

National Association of County Behavioral Health & Developmental Disability Directors

National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners

National Association of Social Workers

National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors

National Council for Mental Wellbeing

National Federation of Families

National League for Nursing

National Register of Health Service Psychologists

PsiAN

REDC Consortium

RI International, Inc.

Schizophrenia and Psychosis Action Alliance

School Social Work Association of America

SMART Recovery

The Kennedy Forum

The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health

The Trevor Project

Vibrant Emotional Health

Well Being Trust