

## **MEMORANDUM**

TO: All Clients

FROM: Center Road Solutions

DATE: February 9, 2022

**RE: Senate Committee on Finance Hearing: “Protecting Youth Mental Health: Part 1 - An Advisory and Call to Action”**

On February 8, the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance held a hearing entitled “[Protecting Youth Mental Health: Part 1 - An Advisory and Call to Action](#).” The hearing focused on the growing mental health epidemic in the nation’s youth, what steps Congress can take to address this issue and support those working in the mental health field to combat this crisis.

### **Member Issue Snapshots:**

- Telehealth: Crapo (R-ID), Thune (R-SD), Cardin (D-MD)
- Community-based services: Stabenow (D-MI), Cortez Masto (D-NV), Hassan (D-NH), Warren (D-MA), Menendez (D-NJ)
- Care access: Grassley (R-IA), Casey (D-PA), Menendez (D-NJ), Brown (D-OH), Bennet (D-CO)
- Pandemic: Thune (R-SD), Portman (R-OH), Daines (R-MT), Lankford (R-OK), Cassidy (R-LA), Warner (D-VA)
- Social Media: Thune (R-SD), Hassan (D-NH)

### **Opening Statements:**

**Chairman Ron Wyden (D-OR) ([written testimony](#))**

- Millions of America’s youth are struggling under the weight of a mental health epidemic, struggling in school with isolation and with addiction.
- Children’s Health Insurance Program and Medicaid are the largest payers of mental health care for young people.
- Waitlists to see psychiatrists for children are currently weeks to months long.
- Over 140,000 children have lost a parent or caretaker to COVID-19 and are continuing to rise.

**Ranking Member Mike Crapo (R-ID) ([written testimony](#))**

- The pandemic has increased feelings of social isolation, helplessness, and anxiety.
- Suicide and drug overdose rates in youth have raised dramatically during COVID-19.
- We need to strengthen the mental health workforce and address barriers to mental health care.

**Vice Admiral Vivek H. Murthy, M.D., M.B.A., Surgeon General, Department of Health and Human Services ([written testimony](#))**

- The pandemic is presenting a unique and unprecedented obstacle for our youth that is taking a toll on their emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing.
- In 2019, 1 in 3 high school students reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless - up from 40% the previous decade. From 2011 - to 2015, psychiatric emergency room visits increased 28%. Suicide rates in youth ages 10-24 increased 57% between 2007 to 2018.
- On average there is an 11-year delay between the onset of mental health symptoms in youth and the time they receive treatment.

### **Q&A**

**Ranking Member Crapo (R-ID)**

- Question: What are best practices for clinicians as they work to integrate telehealth into their practices for the long term and what factors should be considered when tailoring these services to younger patients?
- **Dr. Murthy:** Currently telehealth has tremendous promise for expanding access to mental health care but there are still issues to address including expanding broadband access, ensuring that in the public and private payer system there is adequate reimbursement for virtual care, and ensuring that privacy is protected at all times. Individual

practitioners should recognize privacy concerns and recognize that there are times that in-person care is needed. Telehealth should not be seen as a replacement to in-person care, rather a supplement to it.

- Question: What role can technology like telehealth and AI play in reducing burnout in health providers?
- **Dr. Murthy:** Technology can be used to provide flexibility to both patients and providers. Technology needs to be designed around the needs of patients and providers, not for billing purposes or insurance providers.

#### **Senator Stabenow (D-MI)**

- Question: Could you speak to the importance of reaching children in school-based settings like school-based health clinics and how can we use them to expand behavioral health?
- **Dr. Murthy:** You're better off bringing care to where people are. Kids are in school and if we bring care to schools through counselors and nurses the easier we are able to identify mental health issues early and provide better care for them.
- Question: Can you speak to the important role of community-based services?
- **Dr. Murthy:** Community-based services ideally combined with virtual care services provide maximal points of access. Being able to go to places and people they trust can play a big role in whether people speak out and seek help. Having community-based services can provide a safe network of access for young people.

#### **Senator Grassley (R-IA)**

- Question: Is access to an out-of-state provider a barrier to families with children with complex medical needs? How important is it that a child has mental health services coordinated with their physical health?
- **Dr. Murthy:** We need to reduce all barriers to care, including care from out-of-state providers. Measures were put in place during the beginning of the pandemic to help families get access to care particularly out of state and we should not go back on some of those measures.

#### **Senator Carper (D-DE)**

- Question: How can Congress build on preventive and effective mental health services?
- **Dr. Murthy:** Historically as a health system we have focused most of our energy on treatment and not prevention and we are seeing consequences of that, particularly in mental health. There is a number of programs, like the Family Checkup Program, that demonstrate school and community-based prevention programs that reduce rates of mental health challenges down the line and are cost-effective as well.

#### **Senator Thune (R-SD)**

- Question: Do you agree that users should be able to use social media without being manipulated by algorithms designed to keep them on the app?
- **Dr. Murthy:** Yes, users should be able to use social media without being manipulated by the algorithm, and parents and consumers should have access to the data of how these apps are affecting our children.

#### **Senator Portman (R-OH)**

- Question: Can you elaborate on how drug use intersects with mental health and how investment in prevention may prevent drug use, especially from a young age?
- **Dr. Murthy:** Drug prevention programs showed improved mental health outcomes, and improved outcomes in other areas such as graduation rates and fall of teen pregnancies and were cost-effective. Prevention is always better than cure.

#### **Senator Cardin (D-MD)**

- Question: How can you help us get the data we need that telehealth is not just more convenient and increasing access but is also cost-effective to our healthcare system?
- **Dr. Murthy:** Looking at cost globally, it is apparent that technology makes things more efficient and cost-effective, but it's important that it is set up effectively as well.

### **Senator Hassan (D-NH)**

- Question: How do long wait times for care affect children's mental health and what can we do to ensure they get adequate and prompt care?
- **Dr. Murthy:** Longer wait times mean the longer the child is struggling and at risk of potentially harming themselves. The other issue is that parents are affected by this as well because they see their children suffering but are not able to get them help.
- Question: How can we give teachers the resources, training, and support to help their students during this mental health crisis?
- **Dr. Murthy:** We have to make sure the workload on educators is reasonable. When the pandemic hit, they were expected to be educators but public health professionals as well in their classrooms. We also need to ensure there is mental health support for educators as well, not just students.
- Question: How can we support research to further understand the impact of social media on the mental health of youth?
- **Dr. Murthy:** Social media companies have data about how their platforms are affecting kids, but independent researchers don't have access to this data. We need transparency but also, we need to implement safety standards.

### **Senator Warner (D-VA)**

- Question: Can you touch on the issue of the rise of eating disorders during the pandemic?
- **Dr. Murthy:** This is where mental health professionals in schools are so crucial because this is something that you want to catch the symptoms of early. You don't want to wait years until severe physical symptoms become apparent to a care provider. School counselors can be crucial to identifying eating disorders early on.

### **Senator Menendez (D-NJ)**

- Question: How can we further support maternal and childhood mental health programs are ensuring that children are starting out on a good foot mental health-wise?
- **Dr. Murthy:** These early intervention programs are very important, but the problem is even when these programs are fully funded, communities sometimes do not have knowledge of the programs or how to utilize them.
- Question: Do you support the need for targeted investment into minority communities that support access to culturally competent care?
- **Dr. Murthy:** We need to take a targeted approach to this, and we need a few things to be done. We need more diversity and representation in the health care fields, more virtual and in-person resources, and a reduction of stigma about mental health in communities of color.
- Question: What should we do to continue to diversify the healthcare field?
- **Dr. Murthy:** We can work with training institutions to be more proactive and aggressive in their requirement in minority communities and work on getting people from communities of color interested in the healthcare field from an early age.

### **Senator Brown (D-OH)**

- Question: How should research and policy come together to lower rates of youth suicide particularly in African American children.
- **Dr. Murthy:** We need to understand what factors are driving this but also we can't wait to act to make sure communities have help. We have to get care to kids where they are. We need to provide counselors and mental health therapists in schools to early identify risk factors.

### **Senator Bennet (D-CO)**

- Question: Could you speak to the importance of higher reimbursement in private insurance as well as Medicaid and Medicare?
- **Dr. Murthy:** Too long we've had low reimbursement rates and insurance companies not implementing parity laws. We need to train more providers to provide better care and reimbursement is a part of that.

**Senator Daines (R-MT)**

- Question: Do you agree that lockdowns and social isolation have contributed to some of the mental health challenges we are facing today in children?
- **Dr. Murthy:** Isolation has harmful effects on the emotional and social wellbeing of children, but children seeing families and friends being impacted by the pandemic, particularly the 167,000 children who have lost a caregiver or parent, this has affected their mental health as well. We have the responsibility to put measures in place that protect people but also acknowledge the negative impact this has been having on children.

**Senator Casey (D-PA)**

- Question: What broader policies to improve the wellbeing of children and families should we be considering?
- **Dr. Murthy:** There are many factors that impact the mental health of our kids, including food insecurity, economic insecurity, and homelessness. In order for kids to feel secure, they need to have good attachments and supports but they also need to feel hopeful about the future. We need to address things like climate change, violence, and racism - things that make children uncertain about the future. We need to recognize how the broader environment our children are in impacts their mental health as well.