

March 20, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pence  
Vice President of the United States  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Senate Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

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

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

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Republican Leader  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20510

**Dear Vice President Pence, Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Leader McCarthy:**

Our organizations are grateful for the quick passage of the \$8.3 billion supplemental appropriations bill, the “Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act.” This funding will help state and local public health officials with their response to the novel corona virus, or COVID-19. As the United States continues to confront the realities of increasing transmission of COVID-19 and associated social distancing measures, our organizations recognize additional actions are needed by the Administration and Congress to address current and future mental health and substance use needs.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other public health leaders are currently recommending that individuals confine themselves at home for 14 days if they have been exposed to, or are currently experiencing symptoms of, the novel coronavirus, and for organizers to cancel or postpone in-person events of 50 or more people.<sup>i</sup> People in higher risk groups, such as older adults, are being advised to stay home as much as possible. Many states and localities are considering closing or have already closed schools. The experience of other countries indicates that aggressive social distancing measures can help slow the spread of the virus. While these steps are necessary public health precautions, proactively addressing the long- and short-term ramifications of social isolation and COVID-19 on mental health must be an integral part of the response.

Social distancing guidelines can exacerbate social isolation and erode protective factors that otherwise contribute to mental well-being. During the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic in 2003 community connectedness was found to be a major mitigating factor to help subjective well-being.<sup>ii</sup> Similarly, creating an integrated infrastructure for mental health professionals, communities, businesses, and organizations during a pandemic can help mitigate mental health consequences.<sup>iii</sup> Unfortunately, persistent loneliness is a daily reality for many Americans and has been estimated to shorten a person's life by 15 years, equivalent in impact to having obesity or smoking 15 cigarettes per day.<sup>iv</sup>

Currently 112 million Americans live in mental health professional shortage areas<sup>v</sup> and for those receiving care roughly 50 percent must travel more than one-hour round trip<sup>vi</sup>. For those following CDC guidelines of social distancing they can encounter increased difficulty in accessing care, especially for those seeking medication-assisted treatment for opioid use disorder. Individuals who must quarantine due to a possible COVID-19 diagnosis may be at higher risk for psychological distress, including symptoms of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)<sup>vii</sup>.

Recent advances in the reduction of overdose rates could be reversed due to difficulty in accessing treatment, support services, and overall uncertainty. Relatedly, much work remains to address the increasing rate of deaths from suicide and alcohol and still too-high rates of drug overdose<sup>viii</sup>. The current absence of a widely available integrated mental health and substance use health care system could be exacerbated by an increase in demand.

While short-term steps are needed to address the current challenges related to COVID-19, additional action is needed to ensure that mental health and substance use health services are readily available to all Americans, regardless of their socioeconomic status, location, or age during and after this crisis. **We, the signatory organizations, strongly encourage the Administration and Congress to:**

- Immediately implement measures to ensure access and continuation of mental health and substance use services to all individuals during the COVID-19 response and during future public health emergencies including:
  - HHS should issue guidance clarifying that mental health and substance use clinicians and professionals are included in priority testing for COVID-19 as well as targets of emergency medical supplies including masks, respirators, ventilators, and other needed resources for health care professionals during this crisis
  - CMS should issue guidance for various care contingencies should substance use treatment providers become sick or unable to work and affect required quotas for reimbursement
  - SAMHSA should issue guidance to support remote recovery support groups
  - Congress should pass S. 2244/H.R. 4131, the Improving Access to Remote Behavioral Health Treatment Act, to clarify the eligibility of community mental health and addiction treatment centers to prescribe controlled substances for opioid use disorder via telemedicine. HHS recently waived the Ryan Haight restrictions for this pandemic, but this ends once the national emergency ends which could create treatment gaps
  - HHS should launch a special enrollment period for commercial health insurance in the healthcare.gov marketplace during this crisis and future public health crises
  - Congress should ensure that all government health plans provide extended supplies and/or mail order refills of prescriptions
  - Congress should allow for all current discretionary and block grant funds for mental health and substance use programs, including prevention, intervention, treatment, and recovery support, across all relevant agencies across the federal government that cannot be spent this fiscal year due to the pandemic to be automatically extended into Fiscal Year 2021

- Pass, implement, and/or appropriate funding to strengthen crisis services and surveillance including:
  - S. 2661/H.R. 4194, the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act, which would formally designate a three-digit number for the Lifeline
  - H.R. 4564, The Suicide Prevention Lifeline Improvement Act, which would implement a set of quality metrics to ensure resources are effective and evidence-based
  - H.R. 4585, the Campaign to Prevent Suicide Act, which establishes an educational campaign to advertise the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and suicide prevention resources
  - H.R. 1329, Medicaid Reentry Act, which would allow Medicaid-eligible incarcerated individuals to restart their benefits 30 days pre-release
  - Increase funding for the Disaster Distress Helpline
  - Increase funding to serve people who are homeless and to divert people who are at immediate risk of becoming homeless during this crisis
  
- Pass and implement reforms to ensure long-term availability of care, especially for populations at higher risk of self-harm or substance misuse, including:
  - S. 824/H.R. 1767, the Excellence in Mental Health and Addiction Treatment Expansion Act, which would expand the Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic Program
  - S. 1122/H.R. 1109, the Mental Health Services for Students Act which expands SAMHSA’s Project AWARE State Educational Agency Grant Program to support provision of mental health services
  - S. 2492/H.R. 2599, the Suicide Training and Awareness Nationally Delivered for Universal Prevention (STANDUP) Act, which would create and implement suicide prevention training policies in states, tribes, and school districts
  - Enforce mental health parity and pass S. 1737/H.R. 3165, the Mental Health Parity Compliance Act and S. 1576/H.R. 2874, the Behavioral Health Transparency Act
  - Expand HRSA’s NHSC Substance Use Disorder Workforce Loan Repayment Program
  - H.R. 2431, the Mental Health Professionals Workforce Shortage Loan Repayment Act, which would establish a loan repayment program for mental health professionals working in shortage areas
  - S. 2772/H.R. 884, the Medicare Mental Health Access Act, which would allow expand the definition of “physician” under Medicare, allowing psychologists to practice to the full extent of their state licensure without physician oversight of Medicare facilities.
  
- HHS should consider the mental health and substance use effects of future pandemics and national emergencies including:
  - Establishing an interagency taskforce or advisory committee on disaster mental health and substance use to ensure future responses take proper measures to coordinate care, allocate resources, and take appropriate measures to ensure recovery
  - Convening a working group to review current research and funding on disaster mental health through NIH, AHRQ, CDC, SAMHSA, HRSA, FDA, and the Department of

- Justice, and other relevant agencies and identify gaps in knowledge, areas of recent progress, and necessary priorities
- Increased use and reliance of telecommunications, especially in rural areas,

**Responding effectively to COVID-19 is a responsibility we all share, and the policy decisions made in the days, weeks, and months ahead will have tremendous impact on both the physical and mental health of individuals, families, and communities. Concrete actions by the Administration and Congress can go a long way in alleviating the immediate and long-term mental health impacts of this pandemic. The time to act is now.**

2020 Mom

AAMFT Research & Education Foundation

Active Minds

Addiction Connections Resource

Advocates for Opioid Recovery

African American Health Alliance

American Academy of Addiction Psychiatry

American Art Therapy Association

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work

American Association of Suicidology

American Counseling Association

American Dance Therapy Association

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

American Group Psychotherapy Association

American Mental Health Counselors Association

American Psychological Association

American Public Health Association

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

California Pan-Ethnic Health Network

Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)

Centerstone

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

CleanSlate Medical Group - Addiction Treatment

Clinical Social Work Association

Coalition to End Social Isolation & Loneliness

College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists (CPNP)

Colorado Children's Campaign

Columbia Psychiatry

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA)

Community Care Alliance

Davis Direction Foundation

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

Easterseals

Eating Disorders Coalition

Families USA

Flawless Foundation

Foundation for Recovery  
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice  
Greater Philadelphia Business Coalition on Health  
Health Resources in Action  
Hogg Foundation for Mental Health  
InnovaTel Telepsychiatry  
International OCD Foundation  
Mental Health America  
NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals  
National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors  
National Association for Rural Mental Health (NARMH)  
National Alliance on Mental Illness  
National Association for Children of Addiction (NACoA)  
National Association of Community Health Workers  
National Association of Counties  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Association of Social Workers - Texas Chapter  
National Association of Social Workers at the University of Southern California  
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors  
National Council for Behavioral Health  
National Eating Disorders Association  
National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health  
National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome  
National Register of Health Service Psychologists  
Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies  
Neurofeedback Advocacy Project  
New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc.  
O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law  
Postpartum Support International  
Prevention Institute  
Public Health Foundation  
Residential Eating Disorders Consortium  
Robert Graham Center  
San Francisco AIDS Foundation  
San Juan County Behavioral Health Dept  
Sandy Hook Promise  
SMART Recovery  
Staten Island Partnership for Community Wellness  
Suicide Awareness Voices of Education  
Texans Care for Children  
The Confederation of Independent Psychoanalytic Societies (CIPS)  
The Gerontological Society of America  
The Institute for Innovation & Implementation at UMBSSW  
The Jed Foundation  
The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health  
The Trevor Project

The Voices Project  
Trust for America's Health  
United States of Care  
University of Southern California  
Well Being Trust

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<sup>i</sup> Preventing COVID-19 Spread in Communities. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 2020.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/index.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Anna L.D. Lau, Iris Chi, Robert A. Cummins, Tatia M.C. Lee, Kee-L. Chou & Lawrence W.M. Chung (2008) The SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) pandemic in Hong Kong: Effects on the subjective wellbeing of elderly and younger people, *Aging & Mental Health*, 12:6, 746-760, DOI: [10.1080/13607860802380607](https://doi.org/10.1080/13607860802380607)

<sup>iii</sup> Douglas, P. K., Douglas, D. B., Harrigan, D. C., & Douglas, K. M. (2009). Preparing for pandemic influenza and its aftermath: mental health issues considered. *International journal of emergency mental health*, 11(3), 137.

<sup>iv</sup> Holt-Lunstad, Julianne, et al. "Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review." *Perspectives on psychological science* 10.2 (2015): 227-237.

<sup>v</sup> Bureau of Health Workforce, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Designated Health Professional Shortage Areas Statistics: Designated HPSA Quarterly Summary, as of September 30, 2019 available at <https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/shortage-areas>

<sup>vi</sup> "New Study Reveals Lack of Access as Root Cause for Mental Health Crisis in America," National Council, accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/press-releases/new-study-reveals-lack-of-access-as-root-cause-for-mental-health-crisis-inamerica/>.

<sup>vii</sup> Hawryluck L, Gold WL, Robinson S, Pogorski S, Galea S, and Styra R. SARS control and psychological effects of quarantine, Toronto, Canada. *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 2004 Jul [Accessed March 17 2020].  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid1007.030703>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.tfah.org/report-details/pain-in-the-nation-update-while-deaths-from-alcohol-drugs-and-suicide-slowed-slightly-in-2017-rates-are-still-at-historic-highs/>