

United States Senate

133 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2204

REPAIR AMERICA'S FRAYED MENTAL HEALTH SAFETY NET INVEST IN THE COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH BLOCK GRANT

March 25, 2009

The unfolding economic recession is having a substantial impact on the nation's public mental health system. While States are under tremendous fiscal pressure to reduce services and cut provider reimbursements, the financial crisis is triggering a significant increase in demand for mental health and addiction services – particularly for care furnished by publicly funded Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) and other community-based agencies.

Congress must respond to this crisis by investing at least \$100 million in additional funds for the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant in the FY 2010 Labor-Health and Human Services Appropriations Bill.

CMHCs serve 8 million low-income Americans with mental health and addiction disorders. At present, fully 25% of these individuals have no health insurance. But in the past few months, these safety net providers are reporting spikes in their uncompensated care with increased patient caseloads averaging 15% to 17%. CMHCs are also playing an increasing role in caring for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and closely related psychiatric conditions.

This increase in enrollment comes at the very moment that public mental health systems are confronting a fiscal crisis. The National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors reports that at least 32 state mental health agencies are experiencing budget shortfalls in both the current fiscal year and fiscal 2010. *Furthermore, the Community Mental Health Block Grant – the largest single source of federal discretionary mental health spending – has lost an estimated 55% of its purchasing power since 2001.*

Just last week, the National Alliance on Mental Illness released its second report on America's Health Care System for Adults with Serious Mental Illness. With a national average grade of *D*, the results are alarming. To learn more about how your state is doing, please access the *Grading the States 2009* report: http://www.nami.org/gtsTemplate09.cfm?Section=Grading_the_States_2009

Congress must act to help our nation's frayed public mental health safety net respond to the health care needs of low income Americans (including our returning veterans) living with mental illnesses. Please join us in seeking an \$100 million investment in the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant, which would bring total funding for the program to \$520.7 million.

If you are interested in co-signing the attached letter or need additional information, please contact Kathryn Kietzman <kathryn_kietzman@stabenow.senate.gov>, 4-4822 **by May 1, 2009**. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

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May 1, 2009

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
Senate Labor-HHS Appropriations
Subcommittee
131 Dirksen Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Arlen Specter
Ranking Member
Senate Labor-HHS Appropriations
Subcommittee
156 Dirksen Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Specter:

We are deeply concerned about our nation's public mental health safety net's ability to respond to an increasing number of Americans in need of basic mental health care. While States are under tremendous fiscal pressure to reduce services and cut provider reimbursements, the financial crisis is triggering a significant increase in demand for mental health services, particularly for care furnished by publicly funded Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs).

We urge you to address this crisis by investing at least \$100 million in additional funds for the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant in the FY 2010 Labor-Health and Human Services Appropriations Bill. The Mental Health Block Grant is the principal vehicle for federal financial support for evidenced-based comprehensive community services to people living with mental disorders.

A recent study by the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors clearly illustrates this crisis: 32 State mental health agencies are experiencing budget shortfalls in the current fiscal year and likely into FY10. These public authorities are responding with hiring freezes and by reducing the availability of services to low-income adults with severe mental illnesses and children with mental and emotional disturbances. At the same time, CMHCs across the country are reporting a spike among individuals seeking help but are newly unemployed, have no private health insurance, and are not eligible for Medicaid.

A substantial funding increase for this flexible program would enable States and community providers to immediately respond to patient caseloads swollen by rising unemployment.

Thank you for your attention to this critically important matter.

Sincerely,

Debbie Stabenow