

March 3, 2021

The Honorable Tina Smith
U.S. Senate
720 Hart Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
U.S. Senate
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Smith and Murkowski:

The Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG), a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, families, mental health and addiction providers, advocates and other stakeholders committed to strengthening access to high-quality mental and behavioral health care, is writing to express our strong support for the Tele-Mental Health Improvement Act, which would require group health plans and health insurers to cover mental health and substance use disorder telehealth services during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Your leadership on this issue is critical for individuals with mental health and substance use disorders.

People living with behavioral health conditions need timely and safe access to mental health and substance use disorder services during this crisis. The pandemic is exacerbating existing behavioral health issues and leading to new instances of individuals suffering from anxiety, depression, and substance misuse. Receiving in-person behavioral health care at this time exposes people to greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and the associated fear could also imperil any therapeutic gains from in-person treatment. Allowing individuals to receive behavioral health treatment through telehealth will address the heightened risk of mental illness and substance use disorders while concurrently mitigating the spread of COVID-19.

Your legislation temporarily requires group health plans and insurers to cover mental health and substance use disorder services through telehealth if those benefits would be otherwise covered in-person. We applaud you for requiring that health plans and insurers reimburse these telehealth benefits at the same rate as in-person delivery of care. We commend you for specifying that there should be no barriers to care such as additional prior authorization requirements, that the patient have a pre-existing relationship with the provider, or that a provider needs to be present with the person receiving treatment.

All of these provisions are essential, as many providers have found that during the crisis mental health and substance use disorder services are not covered through telehealth, or the reimbursement is lower than it is for in-person care, and there are often other hurdles in place that restrict access. This legislation will grant individuals experiencing mental health conditions and/or substance use disorders access to safe and timely care and will help mitigate some of the pandemic-related increases in deaths of despair due to suicides and overdoses.

The MHLG thanks you for your bipartisan commitment to improving access to telehealth for Americans who need mental health and/or substance use disorder treatment. We pledge our support to help you move this legislation through Congress.

Sincerely,

American Psychiatric Association
American Psychological Association
National Council for Behavioral Health
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American Art Therapy Association
American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work
American Association of Suicidology
American Association on Health and Disability
American Group Psychotherapy Association
American Mental Health Counselors Association
American Occupational Therapy Association
American Psychoanalytic Association
American Society of Addiction Medicine
Anxiety and Depression Association of America
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare
Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Centerstone
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
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
Education Development Center
EMDR International Association
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
International Certification & Reciprocity Consortium
International OCD Foundation
The Jewish Federations of North America
The Kennedy Forum
Mental Health America
NAADCA, the Association for Addiction Professionals
National Alliance on Mental Illness
The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
National Association of County Behavioral Health & Developmental Disability Directors
National Association for Rural Mental Health National
Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association of Social Workers
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors

National Disability Rights Network
National League for Nursing
National Register of Health Service Psychologists
Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies*
Postpartum Support International
Psychotherapy Action Network
Residential Eating Disorders Consortium
School Social Work Association of America
SMART Recovery