

March 12, 2021

Honorable Bonnie Watson Coleman  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Honorable John Katko  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Watson Coleman and Katko:

The Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG)— a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, family members, mental health and addiction providers, advocates and other stakeholders—is writing to express our support for the Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act. The bill, written following nine months of work by the Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health, authorizes \$805 million in grants and other funding to support research, improve the pipeline of culturally appropriate providers, build outreach programs that reduce stigma, and develop a training program for providers to effectively manage bias and reduce disparities in access to and delivery of mental health care for Black and brown youth. While the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the mental health of nearly everyone, it is imperative for the nation to respond to the needs of young people that have not yet built the resiliency to handle such major disruptions but who have felt the brunt of the tragedy of this national emergency.

This important legislation includes provisions to address alarming Black youth suicide rates and mental health disparities among diverse children and adolescents. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth 12-18 years old and this crisis is even more severe for Black adolescents. Between 1991 and 2017, suicide attempts among black adolescents increased by 73%, while attempts among white youth decreased, according to an analysis of more than 198,000 high school students nationwide.<sup>i</sup> Other studies have shown an elevated risk of suicide among African American boys ages 5 to 11.<sup>ii</sup> Mental health conditions, previous suicide attempts and access to lethal means are among key risk factors in youth suicide.<sup>iii</sup> Other factors, such as bias and discrimination, lack of access to culturally appropriate evidence based suicide prevention interventions, coupled with a severe shortage of diverse and trained mental health workforce, are suicide risk factors for Black youth.<sup>iv</sup>

Notably, the Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act focuses on key areas such as support in schools, scientific research, and increased funding in existing programs. Specifically, the bill would:

- Establish and fund interprofessional health care teams to provide behavioral health care.
- Authorize grants to develop cultural competency educational curricula so students training to be social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists will be able to properly treat youth, regardless of race or ethnicity
- Authorize \$650 million to the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities to enhance research into addressing mental and physical health disparities.
- Authorize an additional \$100 million to the National Institute of Health (NIH) to partner with communities and support clinical research, including clinical research on racial or ethnic disparities in physical and mental health.
- Reauthorize the Minority Fellowship Program for 5 years and nearly double the current authorized funding level.
- Direct HH) to establish a Commission on the Effects of Smartphone and Social Media Usage on Adolescents.

The MHLG thanks you for your leadership on this important legislation and commends you for your commitment to reducing or eliminating mental health disparities experienced by people of color and improving the overall mental health and wellness of our nation's youth.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Art Therapy Association  
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy  
American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work  
American Association of Suicidology  
American Counseling Association  
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention  
American Mental Health Counselors Association  
American Psychiatric Association  
American Psychiatric Nurses Association  
American Psychoanalytic Association  
American Psychological Association  
Anxiety and Depression Association of America  
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare  
Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies  
Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness  
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder  
Children's Hospital Association  
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  
Girls Inc.  
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice  
Inseparable  
International OCD Foundation  
International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses  
Jed Foundation  
The Jewish Federation of North America  
Mental Health America  
NAADAC, Association for Addiction Professionals  
National Alliance on Mental Illness  
National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health  
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health  
National Association of Counties  
National Association of County Behavioral Health & Developmental Disability Directors  
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners  
National Association for Rural Mental Health  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors  
National Council for Behavioral Health  
National League for Nursing

National Register of Health Service Psychologists  
Postpartum Support International  
Psychotherapy Action Network  
Sandy Hook Promise  
Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America  
School Social Work Association of America  
SMART Recovery  
The Trevor Project  
Trust for America's Health  
Well Being Trust

---

<sup>i</sup> Lindsey, M. A., Sheftall, A. H., Xiao, Y., & Joe, S. (2019). Trends of suicidal behaviors among high school students in the United States: 1991–2017. *Pediatrics*, November 144 (5) e20191187. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-1187>

<sup>ii</sup> Bridge, J. A., Horowitz, L. M., Fontanella, C. A., Sheftall, A. H., Greenhouse, J., Kelleher, K. J., & Campo, J. V. (2018). Age-related racial disparity in suicide rates among US youths from 2001 through 2015. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 172(7), 697–699. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.0399

<sup>iii</sup> Bilsen J. (2018). Suicide and Youth: Risk Factors. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 9, 540. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2018.00540>

<sup>iv</sup> Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health. (2020). Ring the alarm: The crisis of black suicide in America. [https://watsoncoleman.house.gov/uploadedfiles/full\\_taskforce\\_report.pdf](https://watsoncoleman.house.gov/uploadedfiles/full_taskforce_report.pdf)