

March 25, 2021

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human
Services, Education & Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human
Services, Education & Related Agencies
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human
Services, Education & Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Cole
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human
Services, Education & Related Agencies
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

As organizations that care deeply about the health and well-being of our nation's children, we write to thank you for providing \$80 million in funding for the Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Program at the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) in the American Rescue Plan Act. The annual appropriations of \$10 million for this program has enabled HRSA to fund 21 states, but the tremendous toll the pandemic is having on child and adolescent mental health necessitates urgent action to expand successful models for increasing access to mental health services for children. We hope that these funds will be used to expand the program to all states, D.C., and the territories for five years. We also request that the Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 Labor, HHS, Education (LHHS) appropriations bill includes level funding of \$10 million to continue existing grants.

Congress's investment in the HRSA Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Program is paying off. A recent RAND study found that 12.3% of children in states with programs such as the ones funded under this HRSA program had received behavioral health services while only 9.5% of children in states without such programs received these services.ⁱ The study's authors concluded that federal investments to substantially expand child psychiatric telephone consultation programs could significantly increase the number of children receiving mental health services. Programs funded by HRSA have increased pediatric provider capacity to screen, refer, or treat children's mental health, increased screening, incorporated health equity, and supported quality improvement.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between April and October 2020, hospital emergency departments saw a rise in the share of total visits that were from children for mental health needs.ⁱⁱ The COVID-19 pandemic has created profound challenges for communities, families, and individuals, leading to a range of emotional and behavioral responses due to the uncertainty, duration, need for quarantine, and loss of family members or loved ones during the pandemic. Studies have found higher rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic symptoms among children, especially among young people of color.ⁱⁱⁱ One study found significantly higher rates of suicide-related behaviors appear to have corresponded with times when COVID-19 stressors and community responses (e.g., stay-at-home orders and school closures) were heightened, indicating that youth experienced elevated distress during these periods.^{iv}

A recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll revealed that 45% of adults feel that their mental health is worse due to the isolation, anxiety, and economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Children are highly affected by family and community conditions and can be at increased risk of experiencing family adversity such as child abuse and neglect and related mental health problems when parents are under high stress.

Research shows pervasive shortages of child and adolescent mental/behavioral health specialists throughout the US. To reduce this severe access barrier, integrating mental health and primary care has been shown to substantially expand access to mental health care, improve health and functional outcomes, increase satisfaction

with care, and achieve cost savings. Expanding the capacity of pediatric primary care providers to deliver behavioral health through mental and behavioral health consultation programs is one way to maximize a limited subspecialty workforce and to help ensure more children with emerging or diagnosed mental health disorders receive early and continuous treatment. The HRSA Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Program is an effective investment in enhancing mental health care for children.

Pre-pandemic, the rate of suicide among those aged 10 to 24 increased nearly 60% between 2007 and 2018, making it the second leading cause of death in this population. Given the extent to which the pandemic has exacerbated the existing need for increased child and adolescent behavioral health care, we urge you to continue supporting this program with robust funding so that all states, D.C., and the territories can benefit. Thank you for your consideration. Our organizations are grateful to you for your commitment to the mental health and well-being of our nation's families.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Pediatrics
Academic Pediatric Association
American Academy of Pediatrics, CA Chapter 3
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work
American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
American Pediatric Society
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychological Association
Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs
Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs
Children's Hospital Association
Family Voices
First Focus Campaign for Children
Florida Chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics, Inc.
MomsRising
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Network of Child Psychiatry Access Programs
Pediatric Policy Council
Society for Pediatric Research
Sparlin Mental Health
Texas Pediatric Society, the Texas Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics
The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
ZERO TO THREE

ⁱ <https://www.rand.org/news/press/2019/07/15.html>

ⁱⁱ https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6945a3.htm#F1_down

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7481176/pdf/main.pdf>

^{iv} <https://www.aappublications.org/news/2020/12/16/pediatricssuicidestudy121620>