

September 18, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy,

On behalf of the Mental Health Liaison Group and education groups listed below, we ask that you bring forward for House Floor consideration legislation recently passed through the Energy & Commerce Committee to help prevent youth suicide and intervene early to support youth mental health. As Congress works to continue to respond to the outbreak, it is essential to prioritize the public's mental health and mitigate suicidal risks stressed by the social, economic, and health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent report from the CDC found elevated levels of anxiety and depressive disorders, substance use, and suicidal ideation among Americans.<sup>1</sup> Youth in particular are experiencing increasing mental health effects, with recent data from Mental Health America showing that youth between the ages of 11-17 are now at higher risk of moderate to severe anxiety and depression, with a 14% increase in screening for anxiety and 10% increase in screening for depression.<sup>2</sup> Given that prior to the national pandemic, the second leading cause of death for youth was already suicide, we urge Congress to immediately consider taking action.

Despite suggestions that the mental health crises and suicide rates will worsen, this is not inevitable and can be prevented. By making our nation's mental health an urgent consideration, we can address previous and present concerns and look ahead to effectively mitigate future needs beyond the crisis. We urge you to bring forth the following bipartisan pieces of legislation reported out by the Energy & Commerce Committee:

- 1) **H.R. 7293– The STANDUP Act of 2020:** The bipartisan Rep. Peters (D-CA) and Bilirakis (R-FL) STANDUP Act of 2020 provides resources and technical assistances to States, Tribes, and schools on student suicide prevention awareness and training, and requires SAMHSA Project AWARE grantees to implement school policies for student suicide prevention awareness and training. 70% of students who die by suicide will tell someone of their plans or give a warning sign.<sup>3</sup> Equipping our schools with evidence-based suicide prevention policies will allow all stakeholders in the school community, including students, to be the eyes and ears and to speak up when they see or hear one of these signs from a peer/student.
- 2) **H.R.1109– The Mental Health Services for Students Act:** The bipartisan Rep. Napolitano (D-CA) and Katko (R-PA) Mental Health Services for Students Act provides funding for public schools across the country to partner with local mental health professionals to establish on-site mental health care services for students. This legislation will provide \$200,000,000 in competitive

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<sup>1</sup> Czeisler MÉ , Lane RI, Petrosky E, et al. Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:1049–1057. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1>

<sup>2</sup> <https://mhanational.org/sites/default/files/Coronavirus%20Mental%20Health%20Presentation%208-1-2020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Robins, E., Gassner, S., Kayes, J., Wilkinson, R.H., & Murphy, G.E. (1959). The communication of suicidal intent: A study of 134 consecutive cases of successful (completed) suicide. *Am J Psychiatry*, 115(8), 724-733.

grants of up to \$2 million each through SAMHSA's Project AWARE to give students licensed mental health professionals they need for support.

- 3) **H.R. 4861– Effective Suicide Screening and Assessment in the Emergency Department Act:** The bipartisan Rep. Bilirakis (R-FL) and Rep. Engel (D-NY) Effective Suicide Screening and Assessment in the Emergency Department Act assists emergency departments to develop better suicide risk protocols through the Department of Health and Human Services. Prior to the national pandemic, the number of teens and children visiting emergency rooms for considering or attempting suicide doubled from 2007 to 2015.<sup>4</sup> The emergency department is often the place within the health care system that provides care for patients with suicide-risk factors, with approximately 10% of emergency department patients presenting suicidal ideations. 39% of patients visiting an Emergency Department following a suicide attempt will go on to reattempt suicide within a year. This legislation will provide training to emergency health care providers, establish policies to improve identification and treatment of individuals at high risk, employ additional behavioral health professionals, and improve access to care for patients.
  
- 4) **H.R. 5469– The Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act of 2019:** The Rep. Watson Coleman (D-NJ) Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act of 2019 is the first comprehensive federal legislation to addresses increasing suicide rates and mental health disorders among Black youth. If enacted, the bill would: provide grants for culturally appropriate mental health services in schools and community settings; increase funding for research into mental health disparities in youth of color; increase support for efforts to diversify the behavioral health workforce; and establish a commission to examine the effects of Smartphones and social media on adolescent mental health.
  
- 5) **S. 2661/H.R. 4194– National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2019, “988”:** The bipartisan National Suicide Hotline Designation Act, led by Rep. Stewart (R-UT) and Moulton (D-MA) in the House, requires the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to designate 9-8-8 as a universal telephone number for a national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline, and encourage states to fund the lifeline at the state and local level. This bill passed the Senate on May 13, 2020, was included within the House-passed HEROES Act (H.R. 6800), and the House bill (H.R.4194) was recently reported out through the Energy & Commerce Committee integrating technical changes from the Senate counterpart. House passage of S.2661 would be the most expeditious path to making this bill law.

With the alarming increase in risk for youth suicide, and September being both back-to-school and National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, we urge you to bring these youth suicide and mental health policies to the floor for a vote this month. Thank you for considering the COVID-19 crisis' impact on the public's mental health needs. We appreciate your leadership during these challenging times and are ready to assist in responding to this major public health threat.

Sincerely,

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<sup>4</sup> Burstein, Brett; Agostino, Holly; Greenfield, Brian. (April 8, 2019). Suicidal Attempts and Ideation Among Children and Adolescents in US Emergency Departments, 2007-2015. *JAMA Pediatr.* 173 (6): 598-600. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.0464