

June 5, 2020

The Honorable Richard Neal
United States House of Representatives
2309 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin Brady
United States House of Representatives
1011 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Frank Pallone
United States House of Representatives
2107 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Greg Walden
United States House of Representatives
2185 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairmen Neal and Pallone and Ranking Members Brady and Walden,

The undersigned behavioral health and patient advocacy organizations urge Congress to address the mental health and addictions impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and include H.R. 945, the Mental Health Access Improvement Act, in the next relief package. H.R. 945 would allow licensed mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists to bill Medicare for medically necessary behavioral health services. Mental health and addiction issues have been exacerbated by this public health crisis and require proactive legislative solutions.

The Bipartisan Policy Center's (BPC) Rural Health Task Force released a report this month recommending that licensed mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists be added to the list of Medicare providers as a method of increasing access to care. The BPC highlighted how the report's policy recommendations offer solutions to the challenges raised by the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the National Academy of Medicine, older adults are consistently underserved when it comes to behavioral health care. In the COVID-19 context, this is no different. The CDC and *The Lancet* medical journal both report that older adults are at an elevated risk of hospitalization and admission to an intensive care unit due to COVID-19. Moreover, roughly 4 out of 5 COVID-19 deaths are people who are 65 or older based on emerging CDC data. The increased risk of hospitalization and death, coupled with the intense social isolation resulting from extended stay-at-home orders, are creating a behavioral health crisis among the Medicare population.

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists comprise 40% of the mental health workforce and are licensed to provide medically necessary behavioral health services in every state. They are serving clients via telehealth through Medicaid and other programs, and they have the capacity to treat Medicare beneficiaries this way as well. Furthermore, they are often the only mental health professional available to underserved populations in many counties across the country. As telehealth and other solutions are considered in emergency response legislation, Congress must bolster the mental health workforce to deal with a coming surge in demand.

Please include H.R. 945 in the next COVID-19 relief legislation and allow Medicare beneficiaries access to mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists.

Thank you for your consideration,

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 Dance Therapy Association
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
American Group Psychotherapy Association
American Mental Health Counselors Association
American Occupational Therapy Association
American Parkinson Disease Association*
Anxiety and Depression Association of America
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare
Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Centerstone
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action
Families USA
International OCD Foundation
Mental Health America
Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research
NAADAC
NACBHDD
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association for Rural Mental Health
National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
National Board for Certified Counselors
National Council on Aging*
National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health
National League for Nursing
Residential Eating Disorders Consortium
Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America
SMART Recovery
The American Counseling Association
The Confederation of Independent Psychoanalytic Societies
The Jewish Federations of North America
The Kennedy Forum
The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
The National Council for Behavioral Health
The Parkinson Alliance/Parkinson's Unity Walk*

The Trevor Project

*Denotes organization is not an MHLG member.