

Testimony of the Honorable Gus M. Bilirakis (FL-12)
Before the Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives

Of the ten community project funding requests I submitted, I am here today to talk about the one I marked as my highest priority. I am requesting \$2 million in funding for the Community Health Centers of Pinellas (CHCP) to expand on the mental, behavioral, and substance use disorder services in Pinellas and Pasco Counties, Florida.

Our community, much like many across the state and nation, have seen a tremendous spike in mental health related tragedies over the past year. This includes overdose deaths, suicides, incidents of domestic violence and elderly and child abuse cases. Unfortunately, the pre-pandemic rates for these societal problems were already among some of the highest in our state and nation in Pasco and Pinellas counties. The pandemic just exacerbated the problem.

Despite increases in federal funding in recent years, Florida remains among the nation's lowest in per person funding for mental health services and substance abuse treatment. Many who are seeking help still can't access quality treatment and that needs to change.

Community Health Centers have proven to be an effective model for delivering high quality healthcare (including mental health and substance abuse services) to those who are insured, underinsured and uninsured. However, they simply do not have the funding to meet the dramatic rise in need for these services within our community. I have always been a strong

proponent of community health centers because of their remarkable track record of success. I believe they are part of what is right in our health care system, offering an integrated medical home approach to healthcare that leads to successful patient outcomes and cost-savings.

As a trusted existing partner in our community, I believe they are the appropriate entity to help fill the incredible gap in our community that exists as a result of the pandemic. With this funding, CHCP will expand their outreach to people during their toughest times by establishing two new facilities targeting mental health and substance use disorder services for the Tampa Bay area. This would include one facility in Pinellas County; and one facility in Pasco County.

The proposal has the support of the Pasco County Commissioners, as well as Florida House Representative Chris Latvala and Florida State Senator Darryl Rouson, who represent the area.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge the amazing work that CHCP was able to do during the pandemic.

The organization opened one of the first multiple testing sites for COVID in both Pasco and Pinellas Counties. CHCP provided primary care services to over 76,000 patients, including 40,000 COVID tests and administering over 20,000 vaccines and counting.

It is this track record of success and community trust, along with their accreditations by the Accreditation Association of Ambulatory Health Care and the National Committee for Quality Assurance, that makes them deserving as a community project fund recipient.

Their history certainly proves that they will be a good steward of funds as they expand to address the Mental, Behavioral, and Substance Use Disorder needs of our Community.