



Depression and Bipolar
Support Alliance

June 30, 2020

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr.
Chair
House Committee on Energy & Commerce
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rep. Greg Walden
Ranking Member
House Committee on Energy & Commerce
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Comment: Hearing on “High Anxiety and Stress: Legislation to Improve Mental Health During Crisis”

Dear Chairman Pallone and Ranking Member Walden,

The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) applauds the leadership of the House Committee on Energy & Commerce for holding a hearing on June 30, 2020 on “High Anxiety and Stress: Legislation to Improve Mental Health During Crisis.” We respectfully submit the following comment as written testimony for the committee record.

DBSA is the leading national peer-focused organization providing support for individuals living with depression and bipolar disorders. DBSA's peer-based, wellness-oriented, and empowering services and resources are available when people need them, where they need them, and how they need to receive them—online 24/7, in local support groups, in audio and video casts, or in printed materials distributed by DBSA, our chapters, and behavioral care facilities across America.

As defined by SAMHSA, peer support encompasses a range of activities and interactions between people who share similar experiences of being diagnosed with mental health conditions substance use disorders, or both. This mutuality—often called “peerness”—between a peer support worker and person in or seeking recovery promotes connection and inspires hope. Peer support offers a level of acceptance, understanding, and validation not found in many other professional relationships. By sharing their own lived experience and practical guidance, peer support workers help people to develop their own goals, create strategies for self-empowerment, and take concrete steps towards building fulfilling, self-determined lives for themselves.

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance Experience

DBSA was founded 35 years ago on the idea of peers supporting peers. A key goal of the founders was to provide volunteer-founded, peer-led support group meetings for people living with behavioral health conditions in their local communities.

Peer support groups can range from serving as one therapeutic component of a comprehensive behavioral health treatment plan to serving as an individual's sole support system. Support groups

attract a broad variety of participants who may previously have avoided peers and their traditional support system such as family and friends. However, after interacting with a support group, participants report feeling validation.¹

Through our network of chapter affiliates, DBSA has supported over 500 free in-person weekly support group meetings. Fifty percent of these chapters have moved to an online format since March 2020.

In addition, the national organization provides 15 free weekly peer-facilitated online support group meetings. Four of these meetings are designated for seniors, including a Spanish language meeting, and two are designated for women Veterans of color.

In this time of physical distancing, online support groups provide increased access to support and reduce the sense of isolation for individuals who cannot access in-person support. Online support groups can function as an effective addition to counseling services for those who may benefit from more support than counseling offers and/or more frequent support than counseling provides.

Participants in online support groups benefit from a combination of seven therapeutic factors, providing experiences that promote the potential for growth, change, and social experimentation. These experiences contribute to the group's cohesion and perceived helpfulness. For example, the factor of "universality" unites people as they share similar thoughts, feelings, fears, and/or reactions with their cyber community. Others struggle too, and this is not always evident to people in distress.²

Specialized groups for seniors and Veterans can connect people who have similar life experiences and need someone with whom they can communicate honestly and openly without regard to geographic boundaries. Support groups also can be dedicated to specific languages, age groups or gender groups.

In the past four years these online groups have served an average 4,979 participants per year. These groups can accommodate a maximum of 20 individuals, though 12 is optimal. Since February 2020, the demand for DBSA-provided online support has spiked by 400%. This increase necessitated an infrastructure for a "waiting room," whereby individuals queue and are admitted to the online group if there is an opening. This resulted in a 160% increase in waiting lists through April 2020.

As an extension of the online support group meetings, DBSA has been providing one-on-one peer support by certified peer support specialists to DBSA seniors, and to chapter participants through a community-based SAMHSA funded program.

Peer support is an evidence-based service.

In a recent Pepperdine University initiative that surveyed participants of online support groups, seventy-nine percent (79%) of respondents reported that they are more hopeful at the conclusion of their online support group. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of respondents felt they learned new strategies and information about living with a behavioral health condition.

The efficacy of peer support services delivered by a peer support specialist has been long known. Peer support services:

- Reduce recurrent psychiatric hospitalizations for patients at risk of readmission^{3,4,5}
- Improve individuals' relationships with their health care providers^{3,4,5}
- Reduce expensive outpatient services^{3,4,5}

- Better engage individuals in care⁶

Legislative support.

DBSA supports the legislative proposals before the 114th Congress and discussed during this hearing to address the behavioral health needs of Americans during crisis. In addition to the current legislation, we respectfully ask for legislation directing SAMHSA to fund non-profit organizations (NPO) to direct the implementation of needed support group meetings at the local community level. As peers, these organization members are in the best position to understand the need and implement quickly and effectively. SAMHSA directed funding would allow these grassroots organizations to access resources to transition to online meetings, substantially increase the number of online support group meetings and identify and train peers to both facilitate these meetings and provide one-on-one peer support to meeting participants.

DBSA thanks the leadership of the House Energy & Commerce Committee for holding this hearing. Addressing the behavioral health needs of Americans in crisis is critical and with thoughtful implementation provide much needed relief.

Sincerely,



Michael Pollock
Chief Executive Officer

Citations

¹Galinsky, M., Schopler, J., & Abell, M. (1996). Connecting group members through telephone and computer groups. *Social Work with Groups*, 19 (3-4), 21-39.

²Yalom, I. (1995). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy* (fourth ed.). New York: Basic Books.

³Solomon P, Draine J, Delaney M. The working alliance and consumer case management. *J Ment Health Admin.* 1995;22:126–134.

⁴Wexler B, Davidson L, Styron T. Severe and persistent mental illness. In: Jacobs S, Griffith EEH, editors. *40 years of academic public psychiatry*. London: Wiley; 2008. pp. 1–20.

⁵Davidson L, Stayner DA, Chinman MJ. Preventing relapse and readmission in psychosis: using patients' subjective experience in designing clinical interventions. In: Martindale B, editor. *Outcome studies in psychological treatments of psychotic conditions*. London: Gaskell; 2000. pp. 134–156.

⁶Sledge WH, Lawless M, Sells D. Effectiveness of peer support in reducing readmissions among people with multiple psychiatric hospitalizations. *Psychiatr Serv.* 2011