



**AMERICAN COUNSELING
ASSOCIATION**
counseling.org

June 30, 2020

The Honorable Anna Eshoo
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Health
U.S. House of Representatives Committee
on Energy & Commerce
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Michael Burgess
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Health
U.S. House of Representatives Committee
on Energy & Commerce
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Eshoo and Ranking Member Burgess:


On behalf of the American Counseling Association (ACA) and its 53,000 members who work with clients each day. I am writing to respectfully request you to support the millions of Medicare beneficiaries in need of mental health counseling services and urge Congress to pass [H.R. 945](#), the Mental Health Access Improvement Act of 2019, legislation introduced by Representatives Mike Thompson (D-CA) and John Katko (R-NY). The Mental Health Access Improvement Act, which has bipartisan and bicameral support in the 116th Congress, would extend Medicare coverage to include services furnished by licensed professional mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists.

Since the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary declared a public health emergency due to COVID-19 on January 31, 2020, older Americans' emotional, mental, and physical wellness has been significantly impacted. The Kaiser Family Foundation found that, as of April 2020, almost half of Americans reported negative impacts to their mental health related to the pandemic.¹ Medicare beneficiaries are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic and have historically had restricted access to behavioral health services, yielding even more negative impacts on mental health.

In a recent survey of ACA members, counselors indicated that most of their clients' mental health conditions have worsened since the pandemic began. 96% of respondents indicated that clients' loneliness had worsened, followed by social isolation (95%) and anxiety (94%). Employment and financial concerns (91%), depression (90%), grief and loss (82%), acute

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation. (2020). The implications of COVID-19 for mental health and substance use.

6101 Stevenson Avenue, Suite 600
Alexandria, Virginia 22304
ph 703-823-9800
800-347-6647
fx 703-823-0252



stress/post-traumatic stress (80%), and substance use (75%) also appear to be worsening for many counseling clients.

Due to Medicare reimbursement barriers, 55% of counselor respondents had turned away Medicare recipients seeking services, 32% reduced their fee to maintain services, and 29% used *pro bono* services to make counseling accessible to Medicare recipients. These findings are consistent with past research, in which 70% of practicing counselors reported being directly impacted by the Medicare mental health coverage gap.²

Licensed professional mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists comprise over 200,000 graduate-level mental health professionals, and they are recognized by Medicaid, TRICARE, the VA, and most private insurers. Licensed professional mental health counselors are a health care workforce already in place to help these beneficiaries. Yet, Medicare has not updated its covered provider list since 1989 with the passage of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, effectively creating a Medicare mental health coverage gap which H.R. 945 aims to permanently fill.

For all of these reasons, the American Counseling Association strongly urges you to support H.R. 945. If our organization can be of any assistance, or if you have any questions, please contact the ACA's Director of Government Affairs, Brian Banks, at bbanks@counseling.org or at 703-823-9800, ext. 242.

Sincerely,



Richard Yep, CAE, FASAE
Chief Executive Officer
American Counseling Association

² Fullen, M.C., Lawson, G., & Sharma, J. (2020). Analyzing the impact of the Medicare coverage gap on counseling professionals: Results of a national study. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 98(2), 207-219.