

May 8, 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 mental health organizations urge Congress to address the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and include H.R. 945, the Mental Health Access Improvement Act, in a future relief package. H.R. 945 would allow mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists to bill Medicare for counseling services. Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists provide a wide range of mental health and substance use disorder services. Mental health issues, including addiction, have seen have been exacerbated as people struggle to cope with a new reality. This treatment is crucial during this unprecedented time, and we know that the psychological effects of this crisis will linger long after a vaccine for the virus is found.

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.

As more Americans become infected and governors extend stay-at-home orders, people across the nation are experiencing intense social isolation, which is resulting in increased rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. Last month, calls to SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline rose by 891%.¹ As the death rate is much higher among the Medicare- aged population, the threat to their mental health is even more pronounced. They are not only facing fears of contracting the virus, but are separated from their family and friends during these uncertain times. A recent University of Phoenix study found that during this time of social distancing, 44% of Americans surveyed said they were feeling increased loneliness now more than ever before.² The Medicare population, being older and suffering from other health conditions, is likely to be experiencing loneliness at a much higher rate.

¹ Levine, M. (2020, April 7). *Calls to US helpline jump 891%, as White House is warned of mental health crisis.* <https://www.yahoo.com/gma/calls-us-helpline-jump-891-white-house-warned-080900924--abc-news-topstories.html>

² University of Phoenix. (2020, April 14). *University of Phoenix survey examines US adults' mental health and perception of the pandemic.* <https://www.phoenix.edu/students/articles/uopx-survey-examines-us-adults-mental-health-and-perception-of-the-pandemic.html>

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists comprise 40% of the mental health workforce in the United States. They have already begun to see their regular clients via telehealth during this time, and they have the capacity to treat Medicare beneficiaries this way as well. Furthermore, in underserved areas of the country clients can almost always locate a mental health counselor and marriage and family therapist when other professions are not available. 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 a future COVID-19 relief legislation and allow Medicare beneficiaries to access these qualified professionals.

Thank you for your consideration,

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness
American Counseling Association
American Mental Health Counselors Association
California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists
Centerstone
National Board for Certified Counselors
National Council for Behavioral Health