

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 29, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-230 U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-221 U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

As you negotiate the next stimulus package to mitigate the health and economic effects of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, we request that you provide emergency funding to mental health disorder and addiction treatment providers across the country. Many organizations that primarily treat individuals with mental health and/or substance use disorders (collectively, behavioral health organizations or “BHOs”) are at risk of closing their doors as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The immediate and long-term effects of this cannot be overstated as millions of Americans rely on BHOs to address their mental health and substance use disorder treatment needs. As such, we request that you provide at least \$38.5 billion in emergency funding to BHOs across the country that utilize evidence-based practices, with a significant portion of these emergency funds set aside for BHOs enrolled in Medicaid and provide care to underserved groups, or those who otherwise lack coverage for needed behavioral and mental health care.

Millions of individuals, children, and families across the country struggle with mental illness or addiction each and every day. According to the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, nearly 1 in 5 adults, over 47 million people, reported struggling with mental illness, and over 10 million reported suicidal thoughts.¹ These numbers are particularly concerning among the nation’s youth. 1 in 7 youth aged 12 to 17, or 3.5 million adolescents, reported experiencing a major depressive episode in 2018, and record numbers of adolescents have attempted or

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, “2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health,” August 2019, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf>

considered suicide in recent years.² In addition to age disparities, it has been found that people of color, people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and people living in rural communities are less likely to have access to mental health care and more likely to receive lower quality care.³ Further, over 20 million Americans are living with substance use disorder, including 2 million who have opioid use disorder.⁴

The numbers of Americans struggling with mental illness will only continue to grow as families and individuals face the emotional and economic repercussions of the pandemic. A recent poll found that the pandemic and its resultant social and economic impacts are already taking a heavy toll on Americans' mental health. 45 percent of respondents reported that the pandemic is negatively affecting their mental health, up from 32 percent just a month prior.⁵ Experts have even suggested that long-term social distancing from friends, loved ones, and a departure from routine may have both short- and long-term psychological effects.⁶ This, compounded with increasing financial strain and underlying disparities in mental health care access and quality of care, could have dire consequences. Anecdotal reports have indicated that rates of consumption of alcohol and other addictive substances are on the rise.⁷ Furthermore, social distancing measures have created barriers to accessing treatment, which has only been exacerbated by a scarcity of available providers as they either fall ill or become overloaded with patients.⁸

BHOs are crucial to the provision of behavioral health care to Americans across the country who rely on them for a variety of services, but are being burdened by the pandemic. BHOs may provide counseling services to individuals, families, and children struggling with depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and countless other mental illnesses. Additionally, licensed practitioners at BHOs may provide lifesaving medication assisted treatment to individuals with opioid and other substance use disorders. Without this medical treatment, patients in recovery are

² *Ibid.*

³ National Institute of Mental Health, "2016 National Healthcare Quality and Disparities Report," Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality; July 2017. AHRQ Pub. No. 17-0001, April 27, 2020, <https://www.ahrq.gov/research/findings/nhqdr/nhqdr16/index.html>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Racial/Ethnic Health Disparities Among Rural Adults — United States, 2012–2015," Cara James, Ramal Moonesinghe, Shondelle Wilson-Frederick, Jeffrey Hall, Ana Penman-Aguilar, Karen Bouye, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Surveillance Summary 2017, 66 (No. SS-23):1–9, April 27, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/ss/ss6623a1.html>

⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health," August 2019, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf>.

⁵ Kaiser Family Foundation, "KFF Health Tracking Poll - Early April 2020: The Impact Of Coronavirus On Life In America," Ashley Kirzinger, Audrey Kearney, Liz Hamel, Mollyann Brodie, April 2, 2020, <https://www.kff.org/health-reform/report/kff-health-tracking-poll-early-april-2020/>

⁶ CNN, "Long-term social distancing may be traumatic," Madeline Holcombe, April 12, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/09/health/coronavirus-mental-health-long-term-wellness/index.html>

⁷ USC News, "COVID-19 drives alcohol sales — and raises concerns about substance abuse," Gary Polakovic, April 14, 2020, <https://news.usc.edu/168549/covid-19-alcohol-sales-abuse-stress-relapse-usc-experts/>; Newsweek, "U.S. Alcohol Sales Increase 55 Percent In One Week Amid Coronavirus Pandemic," Jade Bremner, April 1, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/us-alcohol-sales-increase-55-percent-one-week-amid-coronavirus-pandemic-1495510>

⁸ Stat News, "The Covid-19 crisis too few are talking about: health care workers' mental health," Jessica Gold, April 3, 2020, <https://www.statnews.com/2020/04/03/the-covid-19-crisis-too-few-are-talking-about-health-care-workers-mental-health/>

at higher risk for relapse, overdose, or overdose related death.⁹ These services will become all the more important as COVID-19 continues to spread and the need for mental health disorder and addiction treatment services grows. However, because of the health and economic impacts of the pandemic and the growing number of patients, many BHOs are at risk of closing their doors. Some BHOs have projected nearly \$40 billion in lost revenue as a direct result of increased staff overtime to meet patient need, increased need for PPE, and the implementation of telehealth services.¹⁰ The impact of such a shortfall would be significant, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt the lives of all Americans.

BHOs have not been sufficiently included in response efforts to date. Congress has passed four stimulus packages to bolster the nation's response to COVID-19. However, none have addressed the growing challenge to and need for BHOs. With a growing number of Americans in need of behavioral health services and many BHOs at risk of closing, the nation is headed towards another public health crisis. To avert another large-scale public health crisis, we must pass a stimulus package that prioritizes the financial security of these vital health care providers and the health of millions of Americans. As such, we respectfully request that at least \$38.5 billion in emergency aid is provided to BHOs that can meet at least one of the following three criteria: accredited by an independent, national accrediting organization or receive state or tribal funding or qualify as community mental health centers as defined in Section 1913(c) of the *Public Health Service Act*. This will allow these critical mental health and addiction treatment providers to keep their doors open and continue providing crucial treatment to Americans during these trying times. We are also supportive of efforts, led by our colleagues, to boost critical funding at the Department of Health and Human Services for mental and behavioral health initiatives, including the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, and other Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Indian Health Service (IHS), and Health Resources and Services Administration programs, as well as specific programs that support the mental and behavioral health of American Indian and Alaska Native populations like the SAMHSA Tribal Behavioral Health Grants, and funding for the Mental Health and Alcohol & Substance Abuse line items in the IHS budget.

We thank you for your attention to this matter and look forward to working together to ensure that any economic stimulus package provides much needed relief for our nation's BHOs.

Sincerely,

⁹ Food and Drug Administration, "Information about Medication Assisted Treatment,"

<https://www.fda.gov/drugs/information-drug-class/information-about-medication-assisted-treatment-mat>

¹⁰ American Society of Addiction Medicine, "\$38.5 Billion Request to Congress for Emergency Funding to Avert Collapse of Behavioral Health Organizations Nationwide," April 7, 2020, https://www.asam.org/docs/default-source/advocacy/letters-and-comments/request-to-congress-for-emergency-funding8b95339472bc604ca5b7ff000030b21a.pdf?sfvrsn=82953c2_2

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