MHLG | MENTAL HEALTH LIAISON GROUP

March 3, 2021

The Honorable Tina Smith U.S. Senate 720 Hart Office Building Washington, DC 20510 The Honorable Lisa Murkowski U.S. Senate 522 Hart Senate Office Building Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Smith and Murkowski:

The Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG), a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, families, mental health and addiction providers, advocates and other stakeholders committed to strengthening access to high-quality mental and behavioral health care, is writing to express our strong support for the Tele-Mental Health Improvement Act, which would require group health plans and health insurers to cover mental health and substance use disorder telehealth services during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Your leadership on this issue is critical for individuals with mental health and substance use disorders.

People living with behavioral health conditions need timely and safe access to mental health and substance use disorder services during this crisis. The pandemic is exacerbating existing behavioral health issues and leading to new instances of individuals suffering from anxiety, depression, and substance misuse. Receiving in-person behavioral health care at this time exposes people to greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and the associated fear could also imperil any therapeutic gains from in-person treatment. Allowing individuals to receive behavioral health treatment through telehealth will address the heightened risk of mental illness and substance use disorders while concurrently mitigating the spread of COVID-19.

Your legislation temporarily requires group health plans and insurers to cover mental health and substance use disorder services through telehealth if those benefits would be otherwise covered in-person. We applaud you for requiring that health plans and insurers reimburse these telehealth benefits at the same rate as in-person delivery of care. We commend you for specifying that there should be no barriers to care such as additional prior authorization requirements, that the patient have a pre-existing relationship with the provider, or that a provider needs to be present with the person receiving treatment.

All of these provisions are essential, as many providers have found that during the crisis mental health and substance use disorder services are not covered through telehealth, or the reimbursement is lower than it is for in-person care, and there are often other hurdles in place that restrict access. This legislation will grant individuals experiencing mental health conditions and/or substance use disorders access to safe and timely care and will help mitigate some of the pandemic-related increases in deaths of despair due to suicides and overdoses.

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The MHLG thanks you for your bipartisan commitment to improving access to telehealth for Americans who need mental health and/or substance use disorder treatment. We pledge our support to help you move this legislation through Congress.

Sincerely,

2020 Mom American Art Therapy Association American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work American Association of Suicidology American Association on Health and Disability American Counseling Association American Dance Therapy Association American Foundation for Suicide Prevention American Group Psychotherapy Association American Mental Health Counselors Association American Occupational Therapy Association American Psychiatric Association American Psychoanalytic Association American Psychological Association American Society of Addiction Medicine Anxiety and Depression Association of America Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law Centerstone Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder **Clinical Social Work Association** College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists Confederation of Independent Psychoanalytic Societies Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action **Education Development Center EMDR** International Association Girls, Inc. Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice International Certification & Reciprocity Consortium International OCD Foundation International Society for Psychiatric Nurses The Jewish Federations of North America The Kennedy Forum

- Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance
- Mental Health America
- NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals
- National Alliance on Mental Illness
- The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
- National Association for Behavioral Healthcare
- National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
- National Association for Rural Mental Health National
- National Association of County Behavioral Health & Developmental Disability Directors
- National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
- National Association of Social Workers
- National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
- National Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders
- National Council for Behavioral Health
- National Disability Rights Network
- National Federation of Families
- National League for Nursing
- National Register of Health Service Psychologists
- Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies*
- Postpartum Support International
- Psychotherapy Action Network
- Residential Eating Disorders Consortium
- **RI** International
- Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America
- School Social Work Association of America
- SMART Recovery
- The Jed Foundation
- The Trevor Project
- **Trinity Health**
- Well Being Trust
- Wounded Warrior Project