

November 24, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy:

The undersigned organizations are writing to respectfully request you to support the millions of Medicare beneficiaries in need of mental health counseling services by urging Congress to pass [H.R. 945](#), the Mental Health Access Improvement Act of 2019. The Mental Health Access Improvement Act, introduced by Representatives Mike Thompson (D-CA) and John Katko (R-NY) and which has bipartisan and bicameral support in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress passed favorably out of the Energy & Commerce Committee on September 9, 2020. This legislation 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.<sup>1</sup> Medicare beneficiaries are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic and have historically had restricted access to behavioral health services, exacerbating negative impacts on mental health. In March alone, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Disaster Distress Hotline saw an 891% increase in calls.<sup>2</sup> Statistics like this demonstrate that, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, the nation is facing a mental health epidemic, one that will likely fall disproportionately on rural and underserved areas.

As of 2019, over 77 million people in the U.S. live in Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas, as defined by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA),<sup>3</sup> with 50% of rural counties in America have no practicing psychiatrists, psychologists, or social workers.<sup>4</sup> Existing mental health systems are in place, with over 225,000 graduate-level mental health professionals across the nation to help address these gaps. These licensed professional mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists are recognized by Medicaid, TRICARE, the VA, and most private insurers, leaving only Medicare beneficiaries uncovered. Licensed

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

<sup>2</sup> A crisis mental-health hotline has seen an 891% spike in calls. CNN, April 10, 2020. See [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> *Designated Health Professional Shortage Areas Statistics, Third Quarter of Fiscal Year 2019, Designated HPSA Quarterly Summary*, Bureau of Health Workforce, HRSA, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, June 30, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> *Workforce Issues: Integrating Substance Use Services into Primary Care*, SAMHSA-HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions, Office of National Drug Control Policy, August 2011.

marriage and family therapists and licensed professional mental health counselors are a health care workforce already in place to help this population.

Yet, Medicare has not updated its covered provider list since 1989 with the passage of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, effectively creating a mental health coverage gap for Medicare beneficiaries, which H.R. 945 aims to permanently fill. According to a recent New York Times [article](#), Virginia Tech professor of Counseling Education Dr. Matthew Fullen surveyed 3,500 practicing licensed counselors and found that over 50% had turned away patients because of the Medicare coverage gap, with almost 40% having been forced to refer existing patients elsewhere once they become Medicare eligible.<sup>5</sup>

For all of these reasons, we urge House leadership to include H.R. 945, the Mental Health Access Improvement Act, in a future House floor vote or included in a potential end-of-the-year package, to improve mental health for Medicare beneficiaries. If our coalition can be of any assistance, or if you have any questions, please contact David Connolly of the Connolly Group at [davidaconnollyjr@gmail.com](mailto:davidaconnollyjr@gmail.com) or 202-557-1728 or the American Counseling Association's (ACA) Director of Government Affairs, Brian Banks, at [bbanks@counseling.org](mailto:bbanks@counseling.org) or at 703-823-9800, ext. 242.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Best,

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  
Center for Medicare Advocacy  
Centerstone  
The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research  
National Board for Certified Counselors  
National Council for Behavioral Health

CC: Rep. Frank Pallone, Energy & Commerce Committee Chairman  
Rep. Greg Walden, Energy & Commerce Committee Ranking Member  
Rep. Richard Neal, Ways & Means Committee Chairman  
Rep. Kevin Brady, Ways & Means Committee Ranking Member  
Rep. Mike Thompson  
Rep. John Katko

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<sup>5</sup>*Analyzing the Impact of the Medicare Coverage Gap on Counseling Professionals: Results of a National Study*, Journal of Counseling and Development, March 8, 2020.