



**AMERICAN COUNSELING
ASSOCIATION**
counseling.org

December 7, 2020

President-elect Joe Biden
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, DC 20230

Vice President-elect Kamala Harris
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris:

On behalf of the American Counseling Association (ACA) and its 53,000 members, we offer our congratulations to you both. The challenges facing your new administration are unprecedented, and we look forward to your leadership in supporting Americans in need of mental health care.

ACA is the world's largest association exclusively representing licensed professional counselors in various practice settings, and many of our members are on the frontlines of the pandemic helping individuals cope with mental health conditions exacerbated by increased isolation, loneliness, grief and loss caused by COVID-19. 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 the pandemic has led to negative impacts to their mental health.¹

For many years, ACA members have also witnessed first-hand the barriers to continuity of mental health care posed by the longstanding Medicare coverage gap, which prevents beneficiaries from continuing to see their mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists once they turn 65 years old and enroll in Medicare. 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 March alone, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Disaster Distress Hotline saw an 891% increase in calls.² 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.

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

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

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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),³ with 50% of rural counties in America having no practicing psychiatrists, psychologists, or social workers.⁴ Existing mental health systems are in place, with over 225,000 graduate-level mental health professionals across the nation helping 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 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 and ACA member Dr. Matthew Fullen surveyed 3,500 practicing licensed counselors and found that over 55% 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. These findings are consistent with past research, in which 70% of practicing counselors reported being directly impacted by the Medicare mental health coverage gap.⁵

ACA works closely with the Medicare Access Coalition, which includes many leading mental health organizations such as American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, American Mental Health Counselors Association, and National Board for Certified Counselors, advocating for the millions of Medicare beneficiaries in need of mental health counseling services. ACA and other members have a long history in advocacy efforts to pass legislation to include licensed professional mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists in Medicare, with bills passing the House twice in 2007 and 2009 and the Senate twice in 2003 and 2005, showing the long-term bipartisan Congressional support for this effort.

We want to make you aware that the 116th Congress has considered legislation that would extend Medicare coverage to include services furnished by licensed professional mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists. The Mental Health Access Improvement Act of 2019 ([H.R. 945/S. 286](#)) was introduced by Representatives Mike Thompson (D-CA) and John Katko (R-NY) and Senators John Barrasso (R-WY) and Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), and enjoys bipartisan and bicameral support. This legislation, which the ACA strongly supports, intends to permanently fill the Medicare mental health coverage gap by extending Medicare coverage to

³ *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.

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

⁵ 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.



include services performed by professional mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists.

We hope we can be a trusted resource for your transition team and your Administration on these important issues. We look forward to working with you and your Administration on closing the mental health gap and more effectively addressing the needs of those living with mental illness by promoting the overall mental health of all Americans. Congratulations again, and please let us know how we may be helpful.

Sincerely,



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