

# Mental Health Liaison Group

May 17, 2005

The Honorable Susan Collins  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jim Ramstad  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Collins and Representative Ramstad:

The undersigned organizations in the Mental Health Liaison Group – a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, families, advocates, professionals and providers dedicated to expanding the availability of mental health services and improving mental health care in America – are pleased to support the **Keeping Families Together Act (S. 380/H.R. 823)**. This vital legislation would establish a state family support grant program to end the tragedy of parents needing to relinquish legal custody of their children to state agencies for the sole purpose of obtaining mental health services for their children.

As you know, the custody relinquishment problem is exacerbated by the growing number of families that are either uninsured or under-insured, with minimal coverage for mental health care. Private healthcare plans frequently do not cover many services needed by children with physical, mental, or developmental disabilities. In many instances, these families exceed the income level for Medicaid eligibility. As a result, many parents turn to the child welfare or juvenile justice system for assistance. Yet neither system is intended nor equipped to care for a child with a serious mental disorder. Unfortunately, however, as the law currently exists in many states, parents must relinquish custody to receive out-of-home services they cannot afford. Ironically, children in this situation are frequently placed in foster families, receiving full funding for their care, while parents lose contact, influence and decision-making authority.

The Keeping Families Together Act responds to the growing crisis in children's mental health by attempting to correct a fragmented service system. The legislation will provide state grants to establish interagency systems of care for children and adolescents with serious mental and emotional disorders. It will also eliminate barriers to community-based care for children with serious mental and emotional disorders by enabling a greater number of children to receive mental health services under the Section 1915(c) Medicaid home- and community-based waiver, thereby avoiding out-of-home placement. Additionally, this legislation will establish a federal interagency task force to examine mental health issues in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

With studies showing that approximately two-thirds of children and adolescents are not receiving the mental health services they need, we welcome this bicameral and bipartisan legislation. This important legislation is consistent with recommendations of the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health. The Commission emphasizes the need for federal, state and

National organizations representing consumers, family members, advocates, professionals and providers

local governments to work together with family and provider organizations to “eliminate the practice of trading custody for care and to find a more family-friendly solution.”

Once again, we commend you for your ongoing leadership on children’s mental health policy. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues to enact this vital legislation.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Children and Families  
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry  
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy  
American Counseling Association  
American Group Psychotherapy Association  
American Mental Health Counselors Association  
American Orthopsychiatric Association  
American Psychiatric Association  
American Psychiatric Nurses Association  
American Psychological Association  
American Psychotherapy Association  
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare  
Association for the Advancement of Psychology  
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law  
Child Welfare League of America  
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)  
Clinical Social Work Federation  
Clinical Social Work Guild 49, OPEIU  
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance  
Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action  
Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health  
NAADAC – The Association for Addiction Professionals  
National Association for Children’s Behavioral Health  
National Association for Rural Mental Health.  
National Alliance for the Mentally Ill  
National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders  
National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors  
National Association of Mental Health Planning and Advisory Councils  
National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems  
National Association of School Psychologists  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Coalition of Mental Health Professionals and Consumers, Inc.  
National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare  
National Mental Health Association  
Suicide Prevention Action Network USA  
Tourette Syndrome Association  
Volunteers of America