

May 18, 2023

Honorable Bonnie Watson Coleman
United States House of Representatives
168 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Honorable Grace Napolitano
United States House of Representatives
1610 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congresswoman Watson Coleman and Congresswoman Napolitano:

The Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG) – a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, family members, mental health and addiction providers, advocates, and other stakeholders – is writing to express our support for the reintroduction of the Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act. The bill, written following nine months of work by the Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health in 2019, authorizes \$995 million in grants and other funding to support research, improve the pipeline of culturally appropriate providers, build outreach programs that reduce stigma, and develop a training program for providers to effectively manage bias and reduce disparities in access to and delivery of mental health care for Black and brown youth. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to negatively impact the mental health of nearly everyone, however young people of color have shouldered the brunt of this national emergency.

This important legislation includes provisions to address alarming Black youth suicide rates and mental health disparities among children and adolescents of color. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth 12-18 years old and this crisis is even more severe for Black and Native American adolescents. Between 1991 and 2017, suicide attempts among Black adolescents increased by 73%, while attempts among white youth decreased, according to an analysis of more than 198,000 high school students nationwide.¹ Recently released 2021 data from the CDC showed that Native American and Black students were significantly more likely than their white counterparts to report having attempted suicide, at rates of 16% and 14.5%, respectively, compared to 9%.² Mental health conditions, previous suicide attempts and access to lethal means are among key risk factors in youth suicide.³ Other factors, such as bias and discrimination, lack of access to culturally appropriate evidence-based suicide prevention interventions, coupled with a severe shortage of diverse and trained mental health workforce, are suicide risk factors for Black youth and other youth of color.⁴

In December 2022, Congress passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA) of 2023 which included two provisions from the initial Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act. Specifically, the CAA included the five-year reauthorization of the Minority Fellowship Program (MFP) as well as an increase of the MFP's authorization level to \$25 million. Secondly, the CAA included a section to require the Department of Health and Human Services to establish a Commission on the Effects of Smartphone and Social Media Usage on Adolescents. We are grateful that these important provisions were included in

the CAA, and we are hopeful that the bill will again receive strong bipartisan support this Congress.

This year, the Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act will again focus on key areas such as support in schools, scientific research, and increased funding in existing programs. Specifically, the bill would:

- Authorize \$750 million annually from Fiscal Year 2024-29 for the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities. Also authorize an additional \$150 million annually over that period for the National Institutes of Health to build relations with communities and support clinical research, including on racial or ethnic disparities in physical and mental health and to carry out the Strategic Framework For addressing Youth Mental Health Disparities developed by the National Institute of Mental Health.
- Authorize \$15 million annually from Fiscal Year 2024-29 for HHS to develop an outreach and education strategy to promote behavioral and mental health and reduce stigma associated with mental health conditions and substance use among minority groups.
- Update the Primary and Behavioral Health Care Grant Program to ensure that special consideration is given to serving a high proportion of racial and ethnic minority groups. This program will also be reauthorized from Fiscal Year 2024-29 at \$80 million annually.
- Amend Section 597 of the Public Health Service Act to allow funds to be used to promote best practices or core competencies addressing mental health disparities among racial and ethnic minority groups for training students in the mental health and substance use professions.
- Direct the National Institutes of Health to enter an arrangement with the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine or another body to study mental health disparities in racial and ethnic minority groups and submit the result to Congress.

The MHLG thanks you for your leadership on this important legislation and commends you for your commitment to reducing or eliminating mental health disparities experienced by young people of color and improving the overall mental health and wellness of our nation's youth.

Sincerely,

ACTNow for Mental Health
American Academy of Child and
Adolescent Psychiatry
American Academy of Pediatrics

American Association for Marriage
and Family Therapy
American Association for
Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work

American Association of Nurse Anesthesiology
American Association of Psychiatric Pharmacists
American Association on Health and Disability
American Counseling Association
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
American Group Psychotherapy Association
American Mental Health Counselors Association
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychological Association
Anxiety and Depression Association of America
Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs
Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder
Children's Hospital Association
Crisis Text Line
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
First Focus Campaign for Children
Fountain House
Inseparable
International OCD Foundation
International Society for Psychiatric Nurses
Legal Action Center
Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance
Mental Health America
NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals
National Alliance on Mental Illness

National Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association for Rural Mental Health
National Association for School Psychologists
National Association of County and Behavioral Health and Disability Directors
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Association of Social Workers
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
National Council for Mental Wellbeing
National Eating Disorders Association
National Federation of Families
National League for Nursing
Policy Center for Maternal Mental Health
Psychotherapy Action Network
Residential Eating Disorders Consortium
Sandy Hook Promise
School Social Work Association of America
SMART Recovery
The College for Behavioral Health Leadership
The Kennedy Forum
The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
The Trevor Project
Trust for America's Health
Vibrant Emotional Health

¹ Lindsey, M. A., Sheftall, A. H., Xiao, Y., & Joe, S. (2019). Trends of suicidal behaviors among high school students in the United States: 1991–2017. *Pediatrics*, November 144 (5) e20191187. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-1187>

² Stone DM, Mack KA, Qualters J. Notes from the Field: Recent Changes in Suicide Rates, by Race and Ethnicity and Age Group – United States, 2021, *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2023;72:160-162. DOI: https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7206a4.htm?s_cid=mm7206a4_w

³ Bilsen J. (2018). Suicide and Youth: Risk Factors. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 9, 540. doi:10.3389/fpsy.2018.00540

⁴ Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health. (2020) Ring the alarm: The crisis of black suicide in America. https://watsoncoleman.house.gov/uploadedfiles/full_taskforce_report.pdf