

Dear Senator Bo Watson and House Representative Esther Helton,

I am writing to ask you to cosponsor H.R. 432, the Mental Health Access Improvement Act. This legislation authorizes mental health counselors to serve Medicare beneficiaries. Mental health counselors are trained and licensed to provide mental health counseling and addiction services. Including counselors in Medicare would reduce opioid addiction and increase access to treatment. Mental health counselors can help clients resolve the core issues that lead to drug use. Medicare is currently the single largest payer for opioid-related hospitalizations. Mental health counselors can provide Medicare beneficiaries with the preventive treatment that will reduce their chances of overdose and death.

COVID-19 has only exacerbated the mental health crisis among Medicare beneficiaries. Social isolation, depression, and anxiety are skyrocketing among older during these unprecedented times. According to a study from the Journal of the American Medical Association, the incidence of serious psychological distress in adults over 55 during the beginning of 2020 had doubled from 2019 levels. Please cosponsor H.R. 432 and give Medicare beneficiaries the mental health and addiction treatment they deserve. I have attached a short fact sheet on the subject and hope you can take a look.

Mental Health Access Improvement Act

Understanding the Issue

Medical services are essential for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. It is important to improve access to mental health services to the nation's population. Mental health has been a rising issue over the years, and it continues to rise as time goes by. There have not been enough resources available to get individuals the care that they need. Therefore, it is important to act now.

Facts About Mental Health and Healthcare

- According to the Health Resources and Services Administration, there are more than 5,000 Mental Health Professionals Shortage Areas in the United States, and half of all counties in the U.S. have no practicing psychiatrists or psychologists. Seniors in rural communities are the most adversely affected by these shortage areas.
- 22% of Americans reported access to treatment/ long waiting times as a problem with the healthcare [system](#).²
- 64% of Americans reported the cost of accessing treatment as the main problem with the healthcare [system](#).³
- A statewide study suggests that Tennessee's population is relatively sick and has inadequate access to health care resources.⁴
- Tennessee has some of the best medical professionals but is rated 40th in the nation's overall health care for a state.⁶



"Rural states are facing a major mental health crisis, made worse by our lack of providers, especially in the rural and frontier areas of the state. The change to allow LPCs and LMFTs to provide services under Medicare is critical to addressing this shortage. It will immediately open access to more than 1,000 providers statewide who are able to provide critical mental health services to some of our most vulnerable populations including seniors and the disabled."

*-Andi Summerville,
Executive Director of Wyoming Association
of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Centers*

Concern:

If this bill is not passed there will be less mental health resources available to those who need them and less mental health professionals that can deliver those services.

- **Even before COVID-19, the prevalence of mental illness among adults was increasing.** In 2017-2018, 19% of adults experienced a mental illness, an increase of 1.5 million people over last year's dataset.
- **Suicidal ideation among adults is increasing.** The percentage of adults in the U.S. who are experiencing serious thoughts of suicide increased 0.15% from 2016-2017 to 2017-2018 – an additional 460,000 people from last year's dataset.
- **There is still unmet need for mental health treatment among youth and adults.** 60% of youth with major depression did not receive any mental health treatment in 2017-2018. Even in states with the greatest access, over 38% are not receiving the mental health services they need. Among youth with severe depression, only 27.3% received consistent treatment. 23.6% of adults with a mental illness reported an unmet need for treatment in 2017-2018. This number has not declined since 2011.

Solution: The solution would be to support this policy. It would allow more mental health professional to join the Medicare network. It would allow more access to more individuals that need mental health assistance. It would alleviate some of the access crisis felt by Medicare beneficiaries. It would also lower the strain on our nation's behavioral health workforce. It would also be less costly! will be to amend the bill to remove the deadline and extend Telehealth indefinitely.

Co Sponsors

Senator ~~Debbie~~ Stabenow (D)
Senator Susan Collins (R)
Senator Sherrod Brown (D)
Senator Angus King (I)
Senator Jeanne ~~shaheen~~ (D)
Senator John ~~Boozman~~ (R)
Senator Tina Smith (D)
Senator Christopher Murphy (D)
Senator Lisa Markowski (R)
Senator Thomas Carper (D)
Senator Chuck Grassley (R)
Senator Joni Ernst (R)
Senator Catherine Cortez ~~Masto~~ (D)
Senator Jeff Merkley (D)

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Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Anna Benko, M.S.W./M.B.A