

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.<sup>1</sup> 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%.<sup>2</sup> Mental health conditions, previous suicide attempts and access to lethal means are among key risk factors in youth suicide.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> 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>

<sup>2</sup> 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](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7206a4.htm?s_cid=mm7206a4_w)

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

<sup>4</sup> 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](https://watsoncoleman.house.gov/uploadedfiles/full_taskforce_report.pdf)