

February 23, 2021

The Honorable Norris Cochran  
Acting Assistant Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Hubert H. Humphrey Building  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Acting Secretary Cochran:

On behalf of national organizations representing consumers, family members, mental health and addiction professionals, advocates, payers and other stakeholders we thank you for your recent letter to Governors stating the public health emergency (PHE) declaration will likely remain in place throughout 2021.

This guidance provides the critical stability that health care professionals, patients and families need during this challenging time by ensuring the flexibilities related to health care services under Medicare, Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) remain intact for the benefit of millions of Americans. The importance of having continued and predictable access to mental health and substance use disorder care is more important than ever. Mental health conditions were the top telehealth diagnoses in the nation in November 2020—signifying an almost 20% increase year over year,<sup>1</sup> with no indication this trend is reversing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a disproportionate impact on specific demographics. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Household Pulse Survey reported U.S. adults with symptoms of anxiety disorder and/or depressive disorder have quadrupled since before the pandemic, with higher rates in people of color and women.<sup>2</sup> For youth, school closures have made it especially challenging to maintain mental stability as over half of students receive some mental health services in school settings and 35% receive these services exclusively in schools.<sup>3</sup>

Further, COVID-19 has disproportionately harmed Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities and this is true with respect to mental health. For example, Mental Health America's (MHA's) online screening data indicated the largest increases in the proportion of people experiencing suicidal ideation between 2019 and 2020 was for Native American or American Indian screeners (7.5% increase) and Black or African American screeners (6.89% increase).<sup>4</sup> Telehealth is critically important for reaching underserved communities and expanding the diversity of health care professionals.

Telehealth tools, including the use of audio-only telephone services, have served as a lifeline for Americans in need of essential mental health and substance use care. Individuals with chronic conditions, individuals who live in rural or underserved communities, or individuals that do not have access to safe and reliable transportation are just a few of the demographics that have been able to maintain their care or seek care for the first time because of the broad telehealth flexibilities that your agency has provided.

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<sup>1</sup> FAIR Health. (2020). Monthly Telehealth Regional Tracker. Retrieved from <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media2.fairhealth.org/infographic/telehealth/nov-2020-national-telehealth.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). Anxiety and Depression, Household Pulse Survey. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Warren J, Smalley K. (December 2, 2020). The Long-Term Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health. The Commonwealth Fund. Retrieved from <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2020/long-term-impact-covid-19-mental-health>.

<sup>4</sup> Mental Health America (2020). Mental Health and COVID-19: What MHA Screening Data Tells Us About the Impact of the Pandemic. Retrieved from <https://mhanational.org/mental-health-and-covid-19-what-mha-screening-data-tells-us-about-impact-pandemic#SuicidalIdeationandThoughts>

Thank you for prioritizing the well-being of Americans across the nation through the continuation of telehealth flexibilities afforded by the PHE; we look forward to continuing to improve upon the incredible advancements in care delivery that have been made during this time.

Sincerely,

American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work

American Association on Health and Disability

American Psychological Association

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare

Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness

Centerstone

Children's Hospital Association

Consortium Representing Eating Disorders Care

Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action

Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice

International OCD Foundation

The Jewish Federations of North America

Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance

Mental Health America

NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals

National Alliance on Mental Illness

National Association for Children's Behavioral Health

National Association for Rural Mental Health

National Council for Behavioral Health

National Association of Social Workers

SMART Recovery