



Patrick J. Kennedy

February 24, 2021

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
235 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leader Schumer and Speaker Pelosi,

I write to thank you for the investments contained in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (American Rescue Plan), as well as ask for your assistance to further *integrate* our nation's response to the mental health and addiction crisis into our nation's overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am grateful for the \$4 billion in additional funding contained in the American Rescue Plan for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to address our nation's mental health and substance use crisis, as well as the landmark Medicaid investments in mobile crisis response and reentry services for individuals who are incarcerated. Combined with the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021's significant emergency funding, you have shown a historic commitment to addressing surging mental health and substance use needs.

As our nation's history demonstrates, wherever discrimination and segregation have been endemic, structural reforms to undo their harmful effects are essential. The federal government must take proactive steps toward changing the systems that perpetuate the historic separation, stigmatization, and discrimination of people living with mental health and substance use disorders. One such essential step is ensuring the integration of mental health and physical health – recognizing the fundamental truth that the mind cannot be separated from the body.

Fortunately, the American Rescue Plan offers a common-sense way to integrate our mental health and physical health responses to COVID-19: the expansion of our nation's public health workforce. Because the pandemic has exposed our nation's deeply inadequate public health system, which has been gutted by decades of budget cuts, I wholeheartedly support the \$7.6 billion in funding to build up our public health workforce. The 100,000 new public health workers that these funds will support are a truly groundbreaking investment in public health.

Section 3021 of the American Rescue Plan lists the many permitted uses of these funds, including types of personnel, "as may be required to prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19." Congress could advance the integration of mental health and substance use (together often referred to as "behavioral health") with physical health by simply referencing "behavioral health" in the legislative text.¹ I also would welcome your assistance in encouraging the Department of Health and Human Services to ensure behavioral health is fully integrated into the public health workforce expansion. Without concerted action to ensure the inclusion of

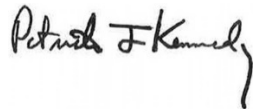
¹ Section 3021(b)(1)(A) could be amended very slightly to read: "...and any other positions as may be required to prevent, prepare for, and respond to **the physical health, behavioral health, and other effects of** COVID-19...."

behavioral health, decades of experience tell us that behavioral health is very likely to be left behind. Such an outcome would be particularly tragic if, with millions of vaccines being administered every day, our expanded public health workforce is unprepared to address the long-term crises of mental health and substance use that will likely far outlast the pandemic.

Unfortunately, our nation must not assume that the pandemic-related increases in anxiety, depression, and substance use will simply recede with the likely reduction in COVID cases and deaths. Each month of the pandemic, anxiety and depression have risen among all age groups, with a staggering 53 percent of young adults ages 18-29 reporting symptoms of depression or anxiety last month.² Fatal drug overdoses skyrocketed at the beginning of the pandemic – with more than 81,000 fatal overdoses between June 2019 and June 2020 alone (reflecting only the first few months of the pandemic).³ Americans newly dependent or addicted to alcohol or other substances may not be able to decrease usage once they are vaccinated. The 100,000 new public health workers funded by the American Rescue Plan can assist in addressing these behavioral health needs – but only if behavioral health is incorporated into the workforce’s duties and training.

I thank you for your strong commitment to addressing the mental health and substance use crisis our country faces. Because mental health is inseparable from public health, I look forward to working with you to ensuring that the \$7.6 billion to expand our public health workforce does not leave behavioral health behind at the moment when needs are surging. I look forward to assisting however I can.

Sincerely,



Patrick J. Kennedy
Former U.S. Representative (D-RI)
Founder, The Kennedy Forum

² CDC Pulse Survey Data, January 18, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm>

³ CDC National Vital Statistics System, Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts, January 3, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>.