

October 18, 2022

The Honorable Ron Wyden
Chair
Committee on Finance
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Crapo
Ranking Member
Committee on Finance
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Wyden, Ranking Member Crapo, and Taskforce Co-Chairs Senators Stabenow and Daines:

On behalf of the undersigned members of the Mental Health Liaison Group's Peer Support Working Group, please accept this response to the Senate Finance Committee Workforce discussion draft which reflects key input provided to the committee in response to its November 2021 Request for Information.

Our members greatly appreciate your leadership and share your goal of addressing the workforce issues. The discussion draft reflects a wide number of priorities, yet it does not mention peer specialists, an important supplement to the behavioral professional workforce and a critical means of quickly expanding access to supports. Peer specialists are experts in lived experience and help individuals engage in care and stay in recovery.

We urge the committee to include the bipartisan PEERS Act, S.2144, which would clarify Medicare coverage of certified peer support specialists in integrated behavioral health care settings, in the integration, coordination, and access section of the broader legislative package as well as the final bill. However, given the strong support on the Committee for expanding access to peer support, it is critical that the current workforce draft include peers and bolder steps to meet the current mental health needs of the population. We urge the committee to ensure that providers of peer support services (peer support specialists and peer recovery specialists) are explicitly set forth in the Medicaid demonstration and are expressly permitted in Medicare Advantage.

In February, we were asked by Committee staff for recommendations beyond the PEERS Act because staff recognized the importance of this critical part of the workforce and we recommended the committee clearly indicate that providers of peer support (peer support specialists and peer recovery specialists) are allowable in its Medicaid workforce demonstration program and avoid repeating the mishap of the SUPPORT Act Medicaid workforce demonstration which left out providers of peer support services and limited the ability for peers to participate. There are two edits to the Medicaid demonstration that would make clear that peers are included:

- In Section 2(A), at the end of the paragraph, inserting “and otherwise improve the network of providers (including providers of clinical and peer support services) that treat mental health and substance use disorders 11 under the State plan (or waiver).” (page 29)
- Adding “ and peer support services” in the list after home and community based services (page 35).

We also recommended expanding coverage of peer support specialists in the Medicare Advantage program and suggested adding the following language:

- [New] SEC. 3. CLARIFYING THE ELIGIBILITY OF PEER SUPPORT SPECIALISTS TO PARTICIPATE IN MEDICARE ADVANTAGE PLANS

- (a) IN GENERAL.—Consistent with the Calendar Year 2020 Medicare Advantage Capitation Rates Announcement, nothing in title XVIII of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 1395 et seq) shall be construed as prohibiting peer support specialists (as defined in subsection (b) above) from participating in Medicare Advantage Plans authorized under Section 1859 of the Social Security Act for the provision of peer support services to assist with furnishing both mental health care and substance use or opioid use treatment services.

Another alternative would be to add peer support services to the list of services to be provided through the rebates to Medicare Advantage plans.

Thank you for the incredible work thus far on the Workforce discussion draft. After nearly a year of work by the committee, the Peer Support Working Group welcomes the opportunity to work with you on further development this legislation and ensuring final enactment before the end of the congressional session. Please do not hesitate to reach out to choward@mhanational.org or escharf@dbsalliance.org to discuss these matters.

Sincerely,

2020 Mom

American Association on Health and Disability

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

Mental Health America

National Association of Peer Supporters

National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors

National Council for Mental Wellbeing

SMART Recovery