

THE COMMUNITY MENTAL WELLNESS AND RESILIENCE ACT OF 2023

BACKGROUND

The US is experiencing an epidemic of mental health problems, with almost 53 million American adults experiencing a diagnosed mental illness in 2021. Millions more adults and youth are experiencing significant distress and anxiety due to mounting toxic stresses and traumas resulting from social, economic, and other factors.

In addition, between 2011 and 2021 more than 90% of Americans lived in a county that was impacted by a natural disaster. Disasters already directly impact over forty-seven million Americans annually, and that number is projected to more than double by 2050. [1] This means one third or more of the US population will be directly impacted every year. Further, the number of people who are emotionally traumatized by a weather disaster often exceeds the amount who are physically injured by 40-1. [2]

Although more funding and personnel is beneficial, individualized clinical treatment and direct human service programs can assist only a limited number of people and only after they experience symptoms of pathology. They cannot address the scale and scope of today's mental health problems, and have no chance of preventing or healing the mounting problems speeding our way due to climate change.

To reduce the current epidemic of mental and emotional struggles, and prevent future ones, the US must quickly expand the way it addresses these issues by supporting communities to use a public health approach to build mental wellness and resilience.

A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

A public health approach to mental wellness focuses on the entire population, not just those deemed at-risk or with symptoms of pathology. It prioritizes preventing mental health problems and integrates healing into prevention activities. And it does so by actively engaging community residents in identifying and enhancing existing protective factors—or assets—and forming additional ones that strengthen everyone's capacity for mental wellness and resilience for all types of adversities.

OVERVIEW OF PROVISIONS

The "Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023" (CMWRA) will direct CDC to fund and support community initiatives that use a public health approach to build population mental wellness and resilience. Specifically, it will appropriate funds for fiscal years 2023 through 2027 to fund small planning grants to help community resilience building initiatives get organized, and larger program grants for up to four years to strengthen and help expand existing community wellness and resilience initiatives.

These initiatives are designed by community members from the bottom up, not by outside experts from the top down. If whole-community mental wellness and resilience build initiatives are launched nationwide, today's mental health problems can be significantly reduced, future troubles can be prevented, and residents will regain faith and hope for the future.

Contact Representatives Paul Tonko (D-NY) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA) for more information.

[1] The Oakridge National Lab. (May 2020). Simulations forecast nationwide increase in human exposure to extreme climate events. Obtained at: <https://www.ornl.gov/news/simulations-forecast-nationwide-increase-human-exposure-extreme-climate-events#>

[2] Mental Health America, The State of Mental Health in America 2023 Report. <https://mhanational.org/sites/default/files/2023-State-of-Mental-Health-in-America-Report.pdf>