

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 9, 2013

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
Vice President of the United States
Eisenhower Executive Office Building
1650 Pennsylvania, Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20501

Dear Mr. Vice President,

We are writing to express our support for improving access to mental and behavioral healthcare in America, particularly in the aftermath of the tragic Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in Newtown, CT.

We urge the multi-agency task force you are now leading to increase access to mental healthcare and improve the quality of care available to patients. The task force can do so by including three fully ready initiatives in its recommendations to Congress: passage of the Excellence in Mental Health Act (formerly S. 2257), full funding of the ENHANCED Act (Section 10410 of Public Law 111-148), and passage of the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Reauthorization Act (formerly S. 740). These initiatives would build on the reforms in the Affordable Care Act that ensure mental and behavioral health services will be covered as part of the essential health benefits for all new plans beginning in January of 2014.

We greatly appreciate President Obama's strong statements regarding the need to address mental and behavioral health as part of a comprehensive response to the tragedy in Newtown. While most individuals living with mental illness are not a danger to themselves or anyone else, violent tragedies over the past several years have demonstrated that the cost of inadequate diagnosis and treatment can be dire. There is an emerging bipartisan consensus that we must strengthen our mental and behavioral health system so that patients have access to the care they need, no one falls through the cracks, and we improve public safety for all Americans.

One-third of the 4.8 million people living with mood disorders do not receive treatment, and fewer than half of people with severe mental disorders receive treatment of any kind in a given year. The Excellence in Mental Health Act, which we plan to re-introduce in the coming weeks, addresses our fragmented mental health system by expanding access to care through America's Community Mental Health Centers and holding the system accountable through higher standards. These health centers are already the primary source of outpatient mental health services in many communities, but have been under-resourced by state budget cuts, while facing a potential 30 percent caseload increase. The Excellence in Mental Health Act establishes evidenced-based, quality standards to ensure that federally qualified centers cover a broad range of outpatient and crisis services, authorizes prospective Medicaid payments to centers that meet the new standards, and supports the modernization and construction of facilities.

In addition, too many individuals, 75 percent of those with depression and bipolar disorder, do not get the most appropriate, evidence based treatment because quality of care varies greatly. Clinicians lack universally accepted care management guidelines, and approximately 50 percent of the time the diagnoses of depression and bipolar disorder are missed entirely. Fully funding the ENHANCED Act, which was passed as part of the Affordable Care Act, will support 21 national centers of excellence to develop simple, standardized screening tests that identify patients earlier, and improve treatment. With support, these centers will work with community based clinics to take academic research and translate it into best practices, develop universally accepted clinical guidelines, standardize diagnoses, erase stigma, and lessen the financial costs associated with for depression and bipolar disorder.

Finally, it is critical that we improve the mental and behavioral health care services provided to children, adolescents, and young adults to ensure early diagnoses and treatment of severe mental and behavioral disorders. The Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act, which will also be introduced in the coming weeks, currently supports youth suicide prevention grants in 35 States, 16 Tribes or Tribal organizations, and 38 institutions of higher education. However, the current law prevents colleges and universities from using funding to support mental and behavioral health care services for students and the hiring and training of qualified personnel. Passing the bipartisan reauthorization bill with this added flexibility, would help ensure children, adolescents, and young adults have access to mental and behavioral health care services from elementary school through college and would help ensure at-risk children have access to the care they need before it's too late.

Thank you for your leadership in addressing the critical work of strengthening our mental and behavioral healthcare as you lead the multi-agency task force. We look forward to working with you on this important issue.

Sincerely,



DEBBIE STABENOW



JACK REED