

# Elevating the Addiction Profession in a COVID-19 Affected World

By Tim Casey, Policy Advisor, Polsinelli

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted our nation's health care and social service systems, including your abilities to deliver vital services to clients in need. While the size and scale of the federal response has been substantial, we continue to advocate every day for the addiction profession and for those battling substance use disorders (SUD) across the country.

NAADAC has been communicating with lawmakers, the Administration, and federal agencies about the impact of the pandemic on treatment and recovery services, as well as on the addiction workforce, throughout the crisis. We have elevated our voice to help enact relief measures and support calls for increased funding. As we continue to urge additional action, feedback from NAADAC members about their experience during the pandemic remains key to shaping our outreach to Capitol Hill and the Administration.

## Telehealth

Throughout the crisis, NAADAC has collaborated closely with key partners to advocate for measures that preserve continuity of care for individuals with SUD. In an environment of physical distancing and stay-at-home orders, telehealth has been a valuable tool for many. NAADAC has and continues to lend its voice to efforts that remove barriers for treatment and recovery services.

The passage of the CARES Act (P.L. 116-136) marked a critical infusion of funding and an important first step in providing regulatory relief for health and social service providers. The new law gave the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) broad authority to waive telehealth restrictions. CMS moved quickly to grant flexibility to providers and suppliers and continues to remove barriers for those who furnish services to Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries. Governors across the country have also sought to provide similar flexibilities in response to the pandemic, acknowledging the importance of telehealth in maintaining continuity of care.

We encourage you visit the robust NAADAC website for information concerning COVID-19, telehealth educational and practice resources, and information and links to the telehealth platform that NAADAC is endorsing that offers our members a free 90-day trial period and a 15% discount after that.

NAADAC encourages you to share your experience. Your ability to deliver services through this trying time is vital, and we want to know what barriers you might be facing.

## Economic Relief

Despite the proliferation of virtual solutions, facilities and practitioners are facing difficult challenges. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, NAADAC has called on lawmakers and the Administration to reinforce the nation's public health infrastructure through loans, grants, and other support programs.



CARES Act established and funded the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund. The \$100 billion federal program provided grants to eligible health care providers, including public entities, Medicare or Medicaid-enrolled suppliers and providers, and other for-profit entities and not-for-profit entities impacted by the pandemic.

The CARES Act includes a number of additional actions of relevance to address the crisis:

- **SAMHSA Emergency Response Grants:** \$100 million in flexible funding has been allocated to address mental health, substance use disorders, and provide resources and support to youth and the homeless during the pandemic.
- **Confidentiality and disclosure of records relating to substance use disorder:** 42 CFR Part 2 regulations, which govern the confidentiality and sharing of substance use disorder treatment records, have been aligned with Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), with initial patient consent with the aim to allow for additional care coordination. NAADAC is watching this closely to learn the effects on clients seeking care. We have asked other Federal partners to do the same.
- **Guidance on protected health information:** The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is required to issue guidance on what is allowed to be shared of patient records during the public health emergency related to COVID-19.

- **Expanding Medicare Telehealth Flexibilities:** Beneficiaries will be able to access home-based telehealth from a broader range of providers in hopes of reducing COVID-19 exposure.
- **Extension and Expansion of Community Mental Health Services Demonstration:** The Medicaid Community Mental Health Services demonstration that provides coordinated care to patients with mental health and substance use disorders is extended through November 30, 2020 and to two additional states.
- **Extension of Demonstration Projects to Address Health Professions Workforce Needs:** The Health Professions Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program is extended through November 30, 2020 at current funding levels. This program provides funding to help low-income individuals obtain education and training in high-demand, well-paid, health care jobs.
- **Coronavirus Relief Fund:** \$150 billion is being provided to states, territories, and tribal governments to use for expenditures incurred due to the public health emergency with respect to COVID-19 in the face of revenue declines, allocated by population proportions, with a minimum of \$1.25 billion for states with relatively small populations.

While these and subsequent measures have helped soften the blow for some, NAADAC is urging Washington to do more and we are working to improve other newly enacted programs to ensure relief to the addiction workforce.

### Congressional Roundtable Works toward Comprehensive Solution

Just prior to COVID-19 closures, NAADAC participated in a small roundtable on Capitol Hill, hosted by Representatives Kennedy (D-MA), Tonko (D-NY), Matsui (D-CA), Cardanes (D-CA), Trone (D-MD), and Chairwoman Eshoo (D-CA). During the roundtable we discussed barriers, challenges, and solutions for improving our mental health and addiction care systems. The meeting brought together Representatives and stakeholders from both public and private sectors around a comprehensive effort to improve mental and behavioral health treatment and access to care.

The dialogue focused on ways to better coordinate care, enforce parity laws, incentivize workforce development, and understand the comorbidity associated with other illnesses, including substance use disorder. NAADAC Executive Director Cynthia Moreno Tuohy underscored the importance of focusing on workforce, the impact of low reimbursement rates and wages on retention and recruitment, and the need to create and bolster incentives, like tuition support and student loan repayment.

The convening Members of Congress and their staff have since collected stakeholder feedback in hopes of unveiling comprehensive legislation. NAADAC submitted feedback urging explicit inclusion of the addiction discipline, greater funding for public-funded SUD facilities through SAPT block grants, and support for workforce development measures and incentives. NAADAC also emphasized the importance of preserving privacy protections for individuals with SUD, the need for universally recognizable and portable credentials, and collaboration between community-based addiction and mental health professionals in school-based programs.

NAADAC was pleased to participate in the roundtable and continues to communicate with lawmakers leading the charge.

### Elevating the Addiction Profession

NAADAC continues to focus on elevating the voice of the addiction profession with lawmakers and regulators. In addition to our advocacy in Washington, we are working to strengthen our voice in states and districts across the country by giving you the tools to amplify the message. On May 1st, NAADAC launched its 2020 Advocacy Webinar Series with the webinar entitled *Shaping Policy and Practice through Advocacy*. In the series, we will examine the central policy discussions surrounding the addiction profession and the critical role advocacy plays in shaping the delivery of treatment and recovery services.

We urge you to join us as we explore topics surrounding workforce, reimbursement, parity, support for federally funded addiction and treatment programs, protecting privacy, and other pressing issues. Please visit the Advocacy pages on the NAADAC website for updates on these issues and provide your feedback.



*Tim Casey is a policy advisor at Polsinelli. He has a proven record of leadership in advancing the federal priorities of national associations, corporations, consumer organizations, and nonprofits. On Capitol Hill, Casey is a trusted resource to Members of Congress and their staff. Casey's experience in the House and Senate combined with his time as a senior lobbyist for prominent health care organizations offers clients sound policy advice, strategic political counsel, and a keen instinct for delivering on key priorities before Congress and the Administration.*

## 2020 Advocacy Webinar Series



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**Shaping Policy and Practice Through Advocacy**  
Recorded on Friday, May 1, 2020 - available on demand!

**Updates on Federal SUD Funding**  
Friday, July 10, 2020 @ 12:00-1:30pm ET

**Bolstering the Addiction Workforce – A Call to Action**  
Friday, August 7, 2020 @ 12:00-1:30pm ET

**Confidentiality Rule Changes and 42 CFR**  
Wednesday, September 2, 2020 @ 3:00-4:30pm ET

**Bringing it Home – Grassroots Advocacy**  
Friday, October 30, 2020 @ 12:00-1:30pm ET