February 23, 2021

The Honorable Norris Cochran
Acting Assistant Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Hubert H. Humphrey Building
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Acting Secretary Cochran:

On behalf of national organizations representing consumers, family members, mental health and addiction professionals, advocates, payers and other stakeholders we thank you for your recent letter to Governors stating the public health emergency (PHE) declaration will likely remain in place throughout 2021.

This guidance provides the critical stability that health care professionals, patients and families need during this challenging time by ensuring the flexibilities related to health care services under Medicare, Medicaid and Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) remain intact for the benefit of millions of Americans. The importance of having continued and predictable access to mental health and substance use disorder care is more important than ever. Mental health conditions were the top telehealth diagnoses in the nation in November 2020—signifying an almost 20% increase year over year,\(^1\) with no indication this trend is reversing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a disproportionate impact on specific demographics. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Household Pulse Survey reported U.S. adults with symptoms of anxiety disorder and/or depressive disorder have quadrupled since before the pandemic, with higher rates in people of color and women.\(^2\) For youth, school closures have made it especially challenging to maintain mental stability as over half of students receive some mental health services in school settings and 35% receive these services exclusively in schools.\(^3\)

Further, COVID-19 has disproportionally harmed Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities and this is true with respect to mental health. For example, Mental Health America’s (MHA’s) online screening data indicated the largest increases in the proportion of people experiencing suicidal ideation between 2019 and 2020 was for Native American or American Indian screeners (7.5% increase) and Black or African American screeners (6.89% increase).\(^4\) Telehealth is critically important for reaching underserved communities and expanding the diversity of health care professionals.

Telehealth tools, including the use of audio-only telephone services, have served as a lifeline for Americans in need of essential mental health and substance use care. Individuals with chronic conditions, individuals who live in rural or underserved communities, or individuals that do not have access to safe and reliable transportation are just a few of the demographics that have been able to maintain their care or seek care for the first time because of the broad telehealth flexibilities that your agency has provided.

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Thank you for prioritizing the well-being of Americans across the nation through the continuation of telehealth flexibilities afforded by the PHE; we look forward to continuing to improve upon the incredible advancements in care delivery that have been made during this time.

Sincerely,

American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work
American Association on Health and Disability
American Psychological Association
Anxiety and Depression Association of America
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare
Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness
Centerstone
Children’s Hospital Association
Consortium Representing Eating Disorders Care
Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
International OCD Foundation
The Jewish Federations of North America
Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance
Mental Health America
NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association for Children’s Behavioral Health
National Association for Rural Mental Health
National Council for Behavioral Health
National Association of Social Workers
SMART Recovery