

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on “Americans in Need: Responding to the National Mental Health Crisis”

February 17, 2022

Today the Committee continues its critical work of how to best support the mental health and well-being of Americans who have faced ongoing mental health challenges – challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the need for mental health care is greater than ever, there are still too many obstacles for people to access that care. One in five American adults reported that the pandemic had a significant negative impact on their mental health, yet only 45 percent of adults with mental illness were able to access the mental health treatment they needed in 2020.

Children, particularly children of color, are experiencing increasing rates of mental health conditions. In fact, in 2020 mental health emergency department visits rose by 24 percent or more for children between the ages 5 and 17.

Americans seeking mental health care face a range of barriers, including stigma and discrimination, workforce shortages, and concerns over the cost and coverage of care.

This Committee has a long history of addressing these barriers to care, including ensuring parity for mental health and substance use benefits to other health benefits. We played a central role in both the passage of the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act, and in the expansion of parity to individual market plans in the Affordable Care Act.

Then, last year, I led efforts to equip the Departments of Labor, Treasury, and Health and Human Services with new enforcement tools to strengthen and enforce parity in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. This law requires insurance companies to submit analyses of their coverage of mental health and substance use disorder benefits to the three departments so that the departments can then provide an annual report to Congress on their findings.

Unfortunately, their first report, just recently released, found that insurance companies are failing to deliver parity for mental health and substance use disorder benefits and are falling short of their obligations under the law. It is unacceptable that insurance companies are flouting the law. Clearly more must be done to strengthen the protections of mental health parity laws. We must ensure that Americans’ health coverage includes robust coverage and access to treatment for mental health and substance use disorder benefits.

Access to mental health support has never been more crucial. Suicide remains the second leading cause of death among American ages 10 to 34. And we know that mental health

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challenges are often compounded. For instance, roughly half of Americans experiencing mental illness will also experience a co-occurring substance use disorder.

Thankfully we took swift action to help meet the growing mental health needs of Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through the fiscal year 2021 funding bill, the CARES Act, and the American Rescue Plan, Congress provided \$9 billion to states, Tribes, and localities to respond to mental and behavioral health needs.

Last year, the House passed nine additional bills shepherded through this Committee that would support the mental health needs of health care providers and students, address inequities in services, and support access to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and its new 988 dialing code launching this summer.

And the House-passed Build Back Better Act would provide an additional \$175 million for a range of mental health workforce and community services. These are critical steps in the right direction, but our work is not done.

As we spend more time online social media and digital platforms will continue to play a role in people's mental health, especially our children's. We must do more to understand both the benefits and risks of this reality.

The Committee is also working to reauthorize a wide range of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration programs that expire in September. As we conduct this work, it is important that we hear from people experiencing mental health challenges and the experts.

I therefore look forward to hearing from our witnesses today. Thank you for joining us to share your expertise and experience.