

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 1, 2021

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader Schumer and Minority Leader McConnell,

As the 117th Congress considers additional COVID-19 response funding, we ask you to include targeted support for the behavioral health needs of our nation's children through the expansion of the Pediatric Mental Health Care Access (PMHCA) program with a \$16 million dollar annual allocation. The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) administers the PMHCA to reduce the national shortage of child and adolescent mental/behavioral health specialists. HRSA currently partners with 21 states under existing funding and the additional \$16 million will permit HRSA to expand that partnership to remaining states, D.C., and the territories.

Families often have trusted relationships with their known providers and are likely to seek their guidance when their loved ones face mental health crises. Since PMHCA's creation in the 21st Century Cures Act, it expanded family and providers' access to mental health experts to improve health and functional outcomes. The program also gives providers a safety net to obtain mental health consultations in real time. Expanding pediatric primary care providers' access to mental health consultation extends the limited pediatric mental health subspecialty workforce, provides care where it is accessible to families, and increases the number of children with mental health disorders receiving early and continuous treatment. Best practices for addressing psychiatric needs suggests early treatment is most effective rather than no treatment or delayed help.

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged communities, families, and individuals in unprecedented ways. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that between April and October 2020, the proportion of mental health-related emergency department visits for children aged 5–11 increased by 24% and for 12– to 17-year-olds increased 31%, compared to 2019. Studies also reported more anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic symptoms among children, especially among children from underrepresented minorities.

Children, their families and pediatric providers' access to PMHCA should not be based on zip code. Currently, the program operates in 21 states, where these funded programs have increased screening, referral, or treatment of children's mental health, with a focus on health equity and quality improvement. Given how the pandemic has exacerbated the existing need for increased child and adolescent behavioral health care, we must act to prevent and respond to these needs by providing their community pediatric providers with telehealth support to diagnose, treat, and refer children with behavioral health conditions.

We are seeking \$16 million in annual funding in the next COVID-19 relief package for HRSA to expand PMHCA access to all states, D.C., and the territories. We look forward to working with you to support the delivery of this critical funding for child mental health.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,

/s/ CHRISTOPHER S. MURPHY
United States Senate

/s/ TAMMY DUCKWORTH
United States Senate

/s/ JACKY ROSEN
United States Senate

/s/ DIANNE FEINSTEIN
United States Senate

/s/ RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate

/s/ CHRIS VAN HOLLEN
United States Senate

/s/ BEN RAY LUJÁN
United States Senate

/s/ AMY KLOBUCHAR
United States Senate