

October 1, 2007

The Honorable Jack Reed
728 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Gordon H. Smith
404 Russell Senate Office Bldg.
Washington D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Reed and Senator Smith:

On behalf of Mental Health America (MHA) and our 320 Mental Health Association affiliates across the country, I am writing to thank you for your leadership in developing the Community Mental Health Service Improvement Act. We welcome the introduction of this legislation, and are pleased to lend our support.

The core elements of this legislation reflect an understanding of the need for fundamental reform of mental health service-delivery in this country. And perhaps nothing better illustrates that need than the 2006 report by the Medical Directors Council of the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors which found that individuals with the most serious mental illnesses die on average 25 years sooner than individuals in the general population. That riveting finding underscores the importance of this legislation and of promoting sound policy based on the fundamental understanding that mental health is integral to overall health.

Science tells us that the mind and body are inseparable, and that behavioral health disorders often co-exist with other medical disorders. Historically, however, systems for delivery of behavioral health services evolved separately from general healthcare delivery. With these separate care systems, co-occurring illnesses are too frequently not all detected, and even when detected the care is not routinely coordinated, let alone integrated. This legislation proposes an excellent model for advancing the goal of integrating mental health care into general healthcare care delivery in providing for co-location of primary care, specialty medical care and substance use treatment services in community mental health settings. Such an initiative represents an important step toward reducing mortality and morbidity among individuals living with mental disorders.

We also welcome those elements of the bill that address the workforce crisis identified in the report of the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health in the mental health and substance abuse field. Both new university-based training programs and additional student loan assistance can help community mental health programs operating in health professional shortage areas. In addition, the bill's proposed tele-mental health and health information technology initiatives should help address the twin goals of improving the quality of care and expanding access to behavioral health services in rural areas.

We thank you for the timely introduction of this legislation, and look forward to working with you to advance these measures as the reauthorization process for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration moves forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "M. J. Smith", written in a cursive style.

President & CEO