

May 4, 2021

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Speaker
United States House of Representatives
1236 Longworth House Office Building
Washington D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy, Leader
United States House of Representatives
2468 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington D.C. 20515

The Honorable Richard Neal, Chairman
House Ways and Means Committee
1102 Longworth House Office Building
Washington D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin Brady, Ranking Member
House Ways and Means Committee
1011 Longworth House Office Building
Washington D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McCarthy, Chairman Neal, and Ranking Member Brady

The Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG), a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, families, mental health and addiction providers, advocates and other stakeholders committed to strengthening access to high-quality mental and behavioral health care, is writing to express our strong support for H. R. 2767, the “Promoting Effective and Empowering Recovery Services in Medicare Act of 2021” or the “PEERS in Medicare Act of 2021,” a bipartisan bill sponsored by Rep. Judy Chu (D-CA) and co-sponsored by Rep. Adrian Smith (R-NE). This bill seeks to provide Medicare coverage of peer support services for individuals with mental illness and/or substance use disorders who are being treated in primary care and receiving integrated behavioral health services. The bill includes the first definition of peer support specialists in the Medicare program and specifies that nothing in the Medicare statute prohibits peer support specialists from providing services billed as part of integrated behavioral health services.

The Unique Role of Peer Support Specialists

Peer support specialists are people with lived experience of a mental illness or substance use disorder who have completed specialized training and are certified to deliver support services under appropriate state or national certification standards. This legislation provides the first comprehensive definition of peer support specialists in federal law. Peer support specialists assist individuals in achieving their recovery goals by furnishing emotional, informational, and other support services to individuals who have been diagnosed with a mental illness (including dementia) or a substance use disorder.

This legislation recognizes the unique role of peer support specialists. They complement therapists, case managers, and physicians as part of a coordinated team. Peer support promotes recovery by helping individuals better engage in services, manage physical and mental health conditions, build support systems, and, ultimately, live self-directed lives in their communities. Under this proposed legislation peer support specialists may be included as part of an integrated behavioral health team that includes a primary care doctor, a consulting psychiatrist, a care manager and others.

The Need for Peer Support Services in Behavioral Health

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recognizes peer support as an effective, evidence-based practice. Peer support services are provided by people with lived experience of a mental illness or substance use disorder who have completed specialized training and are certified to deliver support services under appropriate state or national certification standards. Peer support specialists assist individuals in achieving their recovery goals by furnishing emotional, informational, and other support services to individuals who have been diagnosed with a mental illness (including dementia) or a substance use disorder.

According to SAMHSA, the proven benefits of peer support include reduced hospital admission rates, increased social support and social functioning, and decreased substance use and depression.¹ A 2018 analysis showed that providers with peer services had 2.9 fewer hospitalizations per year and saved an average of \$2,138 per Medicaid enrolled month in Medicaid expenditures.² As of January 2017, 43 states allow Medicaid to be billed for peer support services.

These peer support bills recognize the unique role of peer support specialists, who complement therapists, case managers, and physicians as part of a coordinated team. Peer support promotes recovery by helping individuals better engage in services, manage physical and mental health conditions, build support systems, and, ultimately, live self-directed lives in their communities.

The COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating a pre-existing behavioral health workforce shortage that is particularly acute in rural areas and communities of color. These policy changes represent an opportunity to develop a peer workforce that reflects the communities to be served and understands their unique mental health needs by expanding access to recovery services virtually and in primary care.

¹ [“Peers Supporting Recovery from Mental Health Conditions,”](#) Substance and Mental Health Services Administration, 2017.

² Bouchery, E., Barna, M., Babalola, E., Friend, D., Brown, J., Blyler, C., Ireys, H., The Effectiveness of a Peer-Staffed Crisis Respite Program as an Alternative to Hospitalization, Psychiatric Services, August 2018.

Conclusion

It is for these reasons that the Mental Health Liaison Group strongly supports Rep. Chu's and Rep. Smith's measure to provide Medicare coverage for peer support services for individuals with mental illness and substance use disorders in integrated behavioral health programs, and why we urge Congressional passage of this important legislation.

2020 Mom

American Art Therapy Association
American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work
American Association of Suicidology
American Association on Health and Disability
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychoanalytic Association
American Psychological Association
Anxiety and Depression Association of America
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare
Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness
Centerstone
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
Eating Disorders Coalition
Education Development Center
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
Lakeshore Foundation
Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance
Mental Health America
(NAADAC) the Association for Addiction Professionals
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
National Assn for Rural Mental Health
National Assn of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
National Association for Behavioral Healthcare
National Council for Behavioral Health
National Eating Disorders Association
National Disability Rights Network
National League for Nursing
NHMH - No Health without Mental Health
Postpartum Support International
Residential Eating Disorders Consortium

RI International
Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America (SARDAA)
Sandy Hook Promise
Smart Recovery
The Kennedy Forum
The Trevor Project
Therapeutic Communities of America