



October 27, 2022

The Honorable Ron Wyden
Chairman
Senate Committee on Finance
221 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Crapo
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Finance
239 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Wyden and Ranking Member Crapo:

On behalf of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), I am pleased to write in support of S.828, the *Mental Health Access Improvement Act of 2021*. This important legislation will add licensed mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists as Medicare-eligible providers to help address the behavioral health workforce shortage and increased demand for medically necessary mental health and substance use disorder treatment.

As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately harmed senior citizens. According to provisional data published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the suicide rate among adults aged 65-74 increased by 4% between 2020 and 2021.ⁱ As well, a recent survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents aged 65 and older reported experiencing anxiety or depression during the pandemic.ⁱⁱ

Despite this growing need, mental health services remain inaccessible for many individuals. It's estimated that as many as 122 million people in the United States, or 37% of the population, live in regions with shortages of mental health professionals. Roughly two-thirds of these shortages are in rural or partially rural areas.ⁱⁱⁱ

The *Mental Health Access Improvement Act* will help address these challenges. It will add an estimated 225,000 mental health providers as Medicare-eligible providers, lowering the cost of care and improving access for America's seniors. It will help countless older adults find affordable, local mental health care providers, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

For these reasons, we urge the swift passage of this legislation through Congress. Thank you for your leadership in the fight to end suicide and expand access to mental health care. For further information, please contact Bill White, Senior Manager of Federal Policy, at wwhite@afsp.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Laurel Stine".

Laurel Stine, J.D., M.A.
Executive Vice President and Chief Policy Officer
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. (September 2022.) *Provisional Numbers and Rates of Suicide by Month and Demographic Characteristics: United States, 2021*. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr024.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Kaiser Family Foundation. (October 2020.) *One in Four Older Adults Report Anxiety or Depression Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic*. <https://www.kff.org/medicare/issue-brief/one-in-four-older-adults-report-anxiety-or-depression-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

ⁱⁱⁱ USAFacts. (June 2021.) *Over One-Third of Americans Live in Areas Lacking Mental Health Professionals*. <https://usafacts.org/articles/over-one-third-of-americans-live-in-areas-lacking-mental-health-professionals/>