

July 28, 2020

Senator Lamar Alexander
Chair, Senate Committee on Health,
Education, Labor, and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Patty Murray
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
725 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Richard Shelby
Chair, Senate Committee on Appropriations
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman, Senate Committee on
Appropriations
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Funding is Needed to Ensure Americans Have Access to Opioid Use Disorder Treatment and Recovery Support Services

Dear Chairman Alexander, Chairman Shelby, Ranking Member Murray, and Vice Chairman Leahy:

The novel coronavirus pandemic threatens our nation's progress in the fight against the opioid epidemic. Experts estimate that, on top of all the lives lost to COVID-19, our country is at risk of losing 75,000 additional lives to deaths of despair, including suicide and overdose. That's why we call on you to include funding for addiction treatment and recovery support services in the next COVID-19 response package. Specifically, we request \$300 million to support opioid treatment programs (OTPs) and \$100 million for recovery support services.

The \$425 million CARES Act funding for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) unintentionally left out a key group of providers—opioid treatment programs (OTPs). Requirements for funding eligibility were based on Medicare and Medicaid billing. The SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act of 2018 allowed OTPs to bill services through Medicare, opening up the doors for a new patient population to afford life-saving addiction treatment, including medications like methadone and buprenorphine as well as therapy and counseling. However, this provision only recently went into effect on January 1, 2020 and the Medicaid requirement will only be effective in all states beginning October 2020, effectively making OTP providers ineligible for existing provider relief funds.

To ensure that the 450,000 OTP patients around the country continue to have access to this life-saving care, we request that \$300 million be included in the next COVID-19 stimulus package for opioid treatment programs. This funding will help support uncompensated care, staff retention, and continuation of safety precautions. Help our limited behavioral health providers keep their doors open by insisting that this funding be included in the next package.

We also request that Congress set aside an additional funding stream of \$100 million for recovery support services. Recovery support services can cover myriad types of programming including online and call-in All Recovery Meetings that support multiple pathways to recovery,

peer support services, and evidence-supported programs that teach life skills and/or job skills and training for those in recovery or who are involved in the criminal justice system.

Additionally, access to affordable remote services is a serious problem for people in recovery during this global pandemic, since a lack of social connectivity or connectivity to behavioral health providers is linked to depression, anxiety, suicidality, increased use, and reinitiation of drug or alcohol use. For that reason, we request that funding recipients be allowed to use these resources to provide access to telehealth services and software, equipment, and telecommunications services for people in recovery who need them to access care.

We ask that you ensure that a variety of organizations that provide recovery support services, including grassroots organizations, community groups, and Recovery Community Organizations (RCOs), are eligible for this funding in order to give people in recovery choices and access to programs conducive to their culture, lifestyle, and treatment paths.

Additionally, we request that Congress work with the Department of Health and Human Services to address barriers to telehealth during this global pandemic. First, please encourage SAMHSA to immediately permit OTPs to use telehealth to conduct initial medical exams for admission to OTPs. Lastly, please also encourage the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to lift the current Medicare prohibition on audio-only telehealth to allow access to a range of mental health services by telephone and ensure they are reimbursed the same as an in-person visit. For people who don't have access to audio/visual technology or steady internet, audio-only telehealth might be their only option for accessing care.

On behalf of the 23 million people in our country currently living with addiction and the 25 million people in active recovery, thank you for your attention to this important matter. We urge Congress to fund treatment and recovery support services to save American lives.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Opioid Recovery
American Association for the Treatment of Opioid Dependence, Inc.
MAT Leadership Council
National Alliance for Medication Assisted Recovery
National Association for Behavioral Healthcare
Shatterproof
The Voices Project
Young People in Recovery