

April 11, 2022

The Honorable Patty Murray, Chairman
Health Education and Labor Committee
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Chairman
Energy and Commerce Committee
2107 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington DC 20515

The Honorable Richard Burr
Ranking Member
Health Education and Labor Committee
217 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Ranking Member
Energy and Commerce Committee
1035 Longworth House Office Building,
Washington DC 20515

Dear Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, Chairman Pallone, and Ranking Member Rodgers:

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 [S. 157](#) and [H.R. 2929](#), the *Virtual Peer Support Act of 2021*. This proposal aims to create a grant program that provides a one-time grant to enable eligible local, tribal, and national peer-led organizations who currently offer behavioral health peer support services to expand online behavioral health services and increase the reach of peer support programs to meet the heightened need during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted many people's mental health and created new barriers to care for people currently experiencing mental or emotional distress, and for those living in recovery. The toll on Americans' mental health impact will increase as measures taken to slow the spread of the virus lead to greater isolation and potential financial insecurity.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated racial health inequities by amplifying social and economic factors that lead to poor health outcomes, disproportionately affecting Black and Latinx populations.²

Federal data and academic research showed an unmet need for behavioral health services across the United States even prior to the pandemic.^{3,4} According to SAMHSA, shortages in the behavioral health workforce are a key reason that individuals with mental illnesses do not receive needed treatment. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on using peer support specialists—state-certified individuals who use their own recovery experience and training—to help address these shortages.⁵

¹ <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>

² <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/covid19-behavioral-health-disparities-black-latino-communities.pdf>

³ <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.0584>

⁴ <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/press-releases/new-study-reveals-lack-of-access-as-root-cause-for-mental-health-crisis-in-america/>

⁵ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/695435.pdf>

Research has shown that these evidence-based peer support services improve outcomes such as:

- Reducing recurrent psychiatric hospitalization for patients at risk of readmission,
- Improving individuals' relationship with their health care provider,
- Reducing outpatient visits, and
- Better engaging individuals in their course of treatment.

Peer support programs use peer support specialists who model recovery, teach skills and offer support to people who have achieved significant recovery to assist others in their recovery journeys.⁶ They provide people living with behavioral conditions a place to build a community, share experiences, discuss coping skills, and offer hope to one another. Participation in these groups is generally part of an individual's recovery and wellness plan, and is not meant to supplant treatment, but work in tandem with counseling and other services.

In the early days of the pandemic, organizations that host virtual peer support groups have seen registrations double and the wait lists grow by 166%.⁷ In order to maintain this critical support for at-risk communities, the *Virtual Peer Support Act of 2021* would provide grant funding to facilitate the transition of these services to online platforms.

Specifically, the bill would:

- Create a grant program to provide a one-time grant that would enable eligible local, tribal, and national organizations who currently offer behavioral health support services to transition from in-person meetings to online platforms, or build out their current online capacity to meet increased need due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Grant monies could be used for immediate implementation of peer support programs, virtual transition costs, development of the mental health workforce, and expanding services to meet community needs by offering multilingual or demographic specific services for Veterans, caregivers, seniors, and other peer support groups and services.
- The bill also requires that HHS report to Congress on the efficacy of these services.

The MHLG thanks you again for your commitment to making access to virtual peer support possible for all Americans, including those who need mental health and substance use disorder treatment. We pledge our support to help you move this legislation through Congress.

⁶ <https://www.mhanational.org/peer-services>

⁷ [DBSA Depression and Bipolar Alliance Experience](#)

Sincerely,

2020 Mom	Mental Health America
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work	NAADAC, The Association for Addiction Professionals
American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry	National Alliance on Mental Illness
American Association of Suicidology	National Association for Behavioral Healthcare
American Association on Health and Disability	National Association for Children’s Behavioral Health
American Counseling Association	National Association for Rural Mental Health
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention	National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors
American Group Psychotherapy Association	National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
American Mental Health Counselors Association	National Association of Peer Supporters
American Psychiatric Association	National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
American Psychoanalytic Association	National Council for Mental Wellbeing
Anxiety and Depression Association of America	National Eating Disorders Association
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare	National Health Law Program
Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness	National League for Nursing
Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs	Postpartum Support International
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder	Psychotherapy Action Network
Clinical Social Work Association	Residential Eating Disorders Consortium
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance	RI International
Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action	Sandy Hook Promise
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice	Schizophrenia & Psychosis Action Alliance
IC&RC	SMART Recovery
Inseperable	The Kennedy Forum
International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses	Treatment Communities of America
Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance	Vibrant

CC: Cynthia Whitney (Cynthia.Whitney@childrenshospitals.org);
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