Don’t let Seniors lose access to Health Care

Please cosponsor the “Seniors Mental Health Access Improvement Act”

Improving access to outpatient mental health treatment will help beneficiaries, save lives, and could save Medicare money.

Medicare beneficiaries have serious mental health challenges. The elderly experience mental disorders that are not part of normal aging including anxiety, severe cognitive impairment, and mood disorders. Unfortunately, Medicare beneficiaries don’t enjoy the same access to outpatient mental health professionals as those with private health insurance: Medicare does not reimburse Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs) for the quality, cost-effective treatment that they provide.

There are more than 140,000 LPCs nationwide, licensed for independent practice. Licensed Professional Counselors are Master’s-degreed mental health professionals, meeting education, training, experience, examination, and ethical standards on par with those of providers already covered by Medicare. This is why Senators John Barrasso (R-WY) and Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) will introduce the “Seniors Mental Health Access Improvement Act of 2015”—which would establish Medicare coverage of LPCs.

Inadequate Access to Care

An estimated 37% of seniors display symptoms of depression in a primary care environment. As stated by the Institute of Medicine in a recent report, “[t]he burden of mental illness and substance use disorder in older adults in the United States borders on a crisis.” The report laments that there is a “conspicuous lack” of national attention to ensuring sufficient numbers of mental health service providers for the rapidly growing elderly population.

Mental health conditions in older Americans are associated with a wide range of negative effects, including increased functional disability, reduced physical health, increased mortality, higher rates of suicide, and high overall treatment costs. At least 5.6 million to 8 million older adults—or about 14% to 20% of the overall elderly population—have one or more mental disorders. Depressive disorders and dementia-related symptoms are the most prevalent diagnoses.

In 2009 the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated that covering LPCs under Medicare could cost $100 million over five years and $400 million over ten years. The Seniors Mental Health Improvement Act would pay LPCs only 75% of the psychologist’s rate for mental health services, thereby saving money when the lower cost provider is utilized. This legislation would not add a new Medicare mental health benefit, but would instead simply expand the pool of covered providers for medically necessary treatment.
Comparable Training

Medicare covers mental health services when provided by psychiatrists, psychologists, mental health clinical nurse specialists, and clinical social workers. LPCs and Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs) are not covered, despite the fact that both groups have education, training, and practice rights equivalent to or greater than existing covered providers. Both LPCs and MFTs are licensed for independent practice in all 50 states, and are covered by private sector health plans.

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<thead>
<tr>
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Please cosponsor H.R.2759, the "Mental Health Access Improvement Act of 2015."

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Defend our Veterans
Make sure they get the help they deserve.

Despite the fact that thousands of veterans are awaiting medical appointments, the VA is still failing to hire the appropriate number for Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs) and by doing so, they are failing in their mission to care for our veterans. By the VA's own estimates, we lose a veteran to suicide every 80 minutes, how many of those veterans died waiting for mental health care?

- Last year a CNN investigation uncovered a massive failure in the VA healthcare system that showed that veterans across this country were put on "secret waiting lists" where they waited years for care.
- In April of 2012, the VA's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) found that about half of veterans waited almost two months to obtain a mental health evaluation.
- Despite a law being passed in 2006 and Congressional directives being issued in 2013, the VA still has no plans to recruit LPCs or expand its mental health workforce to include more LPCs.

Congress must act now to help our Veterans!

Only Congress has the power to force the VA to fulfill its mission and care for our nation's veterans. Congress must demand that the VA take swift action to recruit more mental health professionals, and more LPCs into the VA to treat our veterans. Congress can begin to improve the lives of veterans immediately if they take the following steps:

- Senators can co-sponsor S. 1676, a bill sponsored by Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT) that will fully integrate counselors into the VA's training program.
- Representatives can sponsor companion legislation to S. 1676 in the House.
- Direct the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to create qualification standards so that an LPC can be hired to counsel veterans.
- Demand the VA issue a public notice to the entire VA healthcare system (Specifically to VISN Directors, VMAC Directors and HR Directors) reminding them that they are empowered to hire Licensed Professional Counselors, and tell them not to shut-out an entire profession that can provide desperately needed help to our vets.
- Tell the VA to collaborate with the American Counseling Association to help fill vacancies in the VA. The American Counseling Association has a national network and an office of professional affairs that can help find applicants for these positions.

Please, help us ensure that we don't lose another veteran because someone didn't act.
Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program (ESSCP)

Program
The Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program (ESSCP) helps school districts to establish or expand school-based counseling services by hiring qualified state licensed or certified school social workers, school counselors, and school psychologists. The program helps improve school safety and increase students' academic achievement by expanding students' access to counseling services. The ESSCP is authorized under the Fund for the Improvement of Education, Title Section 5421, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), P.L. 107–110.

Who Receives Funding
- The ESSCP provides competitive grants to school districts that demonstrate the greatest need for new or additional counseling services, the greatest potential for replication or dissemination of an ideal counseling program, or propose the most innovative programs.
- All public school districts, with elementary or secondary schools, are eligible to participate in the program and receive funds.
- Under NCLB, Congress expanded the ESSCP to include secondary school activities. The program has a statutory funding trigger of $40 million; therefore, whenever funding exceeds $40 million, secondary schools (i.e., middle and high schools) may receive any funds beyond the initial $40 million.
- Each year, the Department receives 300-500 applications for ESSCP grants. Due to limited funding, they are only able to make a few grants each year.
- School districts are eligible for a maximum award of $400,000 per year for up to three years.
- For more information on the program, or to learn if your state receives funding, please visit the Department's ESSCP website at: http://www.ed.gov/programs/elseccounseling/index.html.

Types of Activities Supported
- The ESSCP has served tens of thousands of students nationwide since it began as a demonstration program in 1999.
- Grants support a wide range of activities based on local needs and circumstances.
- Programs address students' personal, social, emotional, and educational needs through individual, small group, and classroom group counseling.
- Programs also support in-service training for school social workers, school counselors, school psychologists, teachers, and other school staff.
- The program promotes school-linked services integration with other social service agencies, public or private entities, businesses, community groups, and institutions of higher learning.
To increase the likelihood of success, projects must:

- Be comprehensive in addressing the personal, social, emotional and educational needs of all students;
- Use a preventive approach to counseling geared to each child's age;
- Increase the range, availability, quantity and quality of counseling services;
- Expand counseling services only through the use of qualified school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers;
- Use innovative approaches to increase children's ability to understand and get along with peers and family members, make positive decisions and plan for school and career;
- Provide counseling services that include classroom group and small group counseling, individual counseling, and consultation with parents, teachers and administrators;
- Collaborate with institutions of higher education, businesses, community groups, social service agencies, or other public or private entities;
- Evaluate program effectiveness annually.

School districts must establish an advisory board on the design and implementation of the program composed of parents; school social workers, counselors, and psychologists; teachers; school administrators; and community leaders.

Importance of the Federal Role

- The ESSCP is the only federal program that helps school districts hire more school social workers, school counselors, and school psychologists.
- Although the program is small, it plays a critical and fundamental role in expanding students' access to necessary counseling services.
- The recommended caseload for school counselors is 250:1; 400:1 for school social workers; and 500–700:1 for school psychologists when providing comprehensive services.

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<th>ESSCP Funding History (in millions)</th>
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<tr>
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Our Request

The American Counseling Association (ACA) has appealed to Congress to keep the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program (ESSCP) included in S.1177 - ESEA bill (Every Child Achieves Act of 2015); which was designed to rectify the shortcomings of the prior reauthorization, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). ACA has also reached out to Congressional appropriators to retain funding for the ESSCP. In Fiscal Year 2016, we are requesting that Congress support an appropriation of at least $49.561 million for the ESSCP.