

September 18, 2024

The Honorable Dan Sullivan
302 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Catherine Cortez Masto
520 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Sullivan and Senator Cortez Masto,

The Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG) – a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, family members, mental health and substance use treatment providers, advocates, and payers committed to strengthening access to mental health care and substance use treatment – is writing to express support of the UNDERSTAND Act, your critical legislation that creates a system to track how social determinants affect healthcare outcomes in America.

Social factors have a substantial impact on the efficacy of behavioral health and medical/surgical services for people with mental health and addiction disorders. Social determinants of health such as housing, education, employment, and other socioeconomic conditions affect overall health and life expectancy. Specifically, poverty has a statistical link to poor health and mental health outcomes. Poverty is linked to homelessness, exposure to violence, food insecurity, social isolation, and discrimination contributing to toxic stress and the development of behavioral health disorders.

Approximately 20-25% of the homeless population suffers from severe mental illness.¹ Further, in a study of newly homeless individuals in New York City, 6% had diabetes, 17% had hypertension, 17% had asthma, 35% had major depression, and 53% had a substance use disorder indicating chronic disease is more common in newly homeless than the general population.² A study conducted in Boston, Massachusetts found the mortality rate was 9 times higher for men who are homeless and 10 times higher for women who are homeless compared to the general population,² underscoring the role steady housing plays throughout the life course.

¹ American Public Health Association. November 18, 2014. “Support for Social Determinants of Behavioral Health and Pathways for Integrated and Better Public Health”. Retrieved from <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policystatements/policy-database/2015/01/28/14/58/support-for-social-determinants-of-behavioral-health>

² Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (n.d.) “Quality of Housing”. Retrieved from <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-health/interventions-resources/quality-of-housing>

A Trinity University study conducted in San Antonio, Texas found the rate of clinically significant eating disorder pathology increases as the level of food insecurity increases, regardless of gender or ethnicity. Specifically, 17% of the most food insecure children met clinical diagnostic criteria for binge eating disorder.³ This study is being expanded and replicated in other geographic areas with comparable results.

These studies only reveal a small part of the harmful health effects of homelessness, poverty, and additional social determinants in need of further studies to make a definitive conclusion about their effects on health.

The UNDERSTAND Act gathers data on social determinants of health by requiring Medicare, Medicaid, and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) providers to use ICD-10 Z-codes to track trends between social determinants and various health issues. These codes will be used by any provider who is administering care to Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries. The findings will influence future policy making in regard to health, poverty, quality of life, and health care access in economically disadvantaged communities.

Thank you for your leadership on this important legislation. We stand shoulder to shoulder with you in the efforts to better understand the impact of social determinants upon health care outcomes through the UNDERSTAND Act. We look forward to a continued partnership on this vital legislation.

Sincerely,

American Art Therapy Association
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work
American Association of Psychiatric Pharmacists
American Association on Health and Disability
American Counseling Association
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
American Group Psychotherapy Association
American Mental Health Counselors Association
American Occupational Therapy Association
American Psychoanalytic Association

³ Becker, CB; Middlemass, K; Taylor, B; Johnson, C; Gomez, F. (September 2017). Food insecurity and eating disorder pathology. *Int J Eat Disord*; 50(9): 1031-1040. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28626944>

Anxiety and Depression Association of America
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare
Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Centerstone
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
Clinical Social Work Association
Crisis Text Line
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
Education Development Center
Fountain House
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
Huntington's Disease Society of America
International OCD Foundation
International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses
The Jewish Federations of North America
The Kennedy Forum
Legal Action Center
Mental Health America
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association for Rural Mental Health
National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors
National Association of Social Workers
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
National Board for Certified Counselors
National Council for Mental Wellbeing
National Eating Disorders Association
National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health
National Health Care for the Homeless Council
National League for Nursing
National Register of Health Service Psychologists
National Women's Shelter Network
NHMH - No Health Without Mental Health
Policy Center for Maternal Mental Health
SMART Recovery
The Trevor Project
Treatment Communities of America