

Congress Takes Steps to Prioritize Youth Mental Health

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Recognizing the urgent need to increase access to mental health and substance use services for young people, Congress is taking significant legislative steps to strengthen the federal government's response to the nationwide surge in depression, anxiety, suicides and overdoses.

On Wednesday, the U.S. House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Committee approved the bipartisan [Restoring Hope for Mental Health and Well-Being Act \(H.R. 7666\)](#) to reauthorize more than 30 mental health and substance use disorder programs within the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). These programs, set to expire this September, support mental health awareness, education, prevention initiatives, care and crisis services, and behavioral health workforce recruitment, retention and training efforts. H.R. 7666 also establishes a pediatric telehealth access grant program for schools and emergency sites and strengthens existing mental health parity laws so that mental health benefits are not treated less favorably than physical health benefits.

Related developments in the U.S. Senate this month reinforce Congress' commitment to this issue and, importantly, improve the likelihood of a completed bipartisan and bicameral effort on behavioral health this year. Senators Bill Cassidy (R-LA) and Chris Murphy (D-CT) introduced the [Mental Health Reform Reauthorization Act \(S. 4170\)](#) that also would reauthorize expiring federal mental health and substance use disorder programs. This comprehensive legislation addresses key measures such as mental health and substance use disorder parity laws, community mental health services and the mental health workforce. Notably, S. 4170 expands access to pediatric mental health care through improvements to HRSA's Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Program and by creating a set-aside within HRSA's Primary Care Training and Enhancement Program to focus on training for clinicians caring for pediatric populations.

While the Cassidy-Murphy bill has been referred to the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee, the Senate Finance Committee is working on a parallel track to draft and consider a bipartisan mental health package this summer. In March, the Finance Committee

issued a report entitled, “[Mental Health Care in the United States: The Case for Federal Action](#),” that summarized findings from legislative hearings and incorporated stakeholder comments. The report indicated that forthcoming legislation would focus on the federal programs within the committee’s jurisdiction, which include Medicare, Medicaid and CHIP. Additionally, the committee’s work has been informed by five internal mental health working groups that debuted earlier this year: workforce, care integration, parity, telehealth and youth.

Connecting young people with the services they need is not only a priority for Democrats and Republicans in Congress; the White House is also taking steps to raise issue awareness. First Lady Jill Biden and entertainer Selena Gomez recently [hosted a forum](#) featuring advocates who shared their stories to encourage other young people to seek assistance and engage appropriate resources. The forum comes on the heels of a recent [study](#) released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – the first nationally representative survey of high school students’ mental health and well-being during the pandemic – that finds COVID-19 school closures and online-only instruction negatively affected adolescent mental health.

Consideration of behavioral health policy solutions will continue this year ahead of the mid-term elections as lawmakers examine how to improve the federal government’s response to mental health and substance use challenges. While the mental health needs of younger populations remain a top focus, a broad and multifaceted group of mental health and substance use disorder stakeholders are weighing in with Congressional leaders, proposing solutions to bridge gaps in the nation’s fragmented behavioral health care system.

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