

September 23, 2019

The Honorable Rob Portman  
United States Senate  
448 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C., 20510

The Honorable Bob Casey  
United States Senate  
393 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C., 20510

Dear Senator Portman and Senator Casey,

The undersigned members of the Mental Health Liaison Group are writing to express support of the *UNDERSTAND Act* (S. 1323), critical legislation that creates a surveillance system to track how social determinants affect healthcare outcomes.

**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 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> underscoring the role steady housing plays throughout the life course.

Additionally, in a study conducted in San Antonio, Texas, researchers from Trinity University found that 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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-policy-statements/policy-database/2015/01/28/14/58/support-for-social-determinants-of-behavioral-health>

<sup>2</sup> 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>

<sup>3</sup> 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>

through the *UNDERSTAND* Act. We look forward to a continued partnership on this vital legislation.

Sincerely,

2020 Mom

American Art Therapy Association  
American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry  
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work  
American Association on Health and Disability  
American Dance Therapy Association  
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention  
American Group Psychotherapy Association  
American Mental Health Counselors Association  
American Psychoanalytic Association  
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  
Cities Thrive Coalition  
Clinical Social Work Association  
Council on Social Work Education  
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance  
Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action  
Education Development Center  
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice  
International OCD Foundation  
The Jewish Federations of North America  
Legal Action Center  
Mental Health America  
National Alliance on Mental Illness  
National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health  
National Alliance to End Homelessness  
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 Eating Disorders Association  
National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health  
National Health Care for the Homeless Council  
National League of Nursing  
National Register of Health Service Psychologists  
Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America  
School Based Health Alliance  
SMART Recovery  
The Trevor Project  
Treatment Communities of America