

February 9, 2009

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Steny Hoyer
Majority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Boehner
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Madam and Sirs:

On behalf of Mental Health America (MHA) and our national network of more than 300 affiliates across the United States, I strongly urge you to include conference report language that explicitly targets discretionary health funding from the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* (ARRA) to address the increase in mental health conditions accompanying the economic crisis. In addition, MHA implores you to produce a final bill that provides a sum for all discretionary health programs, including prevention and wellness, that more closely matches the House-passed version of this legislation.

Given the strong evidence that economic uncertainty and recession increase the rates of psychiatric symptoms and demand for mental health services, our nation must prioritize efforts to ameliorate the immediate and long-term mental health consequences as part of our recovery and rebuilding strategies. As you know, mental health consumers are already vulnerable. Persons with serious mental illness die, on average, 25 years earlier than the general population, and nearly 33,000 persons each year take their own life, which is roughly twice the number of homicides per year. These were the public health statistics prior to the economic crisis. The situation is likely much worse now.

MHA applauds your efforts to increase funding for state Medicaid programs, expand Medicaid eligibility for low income Americans, and subsidize COBRA coverage for newly unemployed

individuals. However, there are gaps in the ARRA and we urge you to continue your long-standing leadership on public health issues and close these gaps that are critical to the nation's health. Full funding of \$16 billion for a comprehensive range of public health programs must be included in the ARRA. In addition, we urge the conference committee to follow the House's lead in prioritizing prevention and wellness and health professions training.

Finally, it is critical that you include report language that ensures that funding in the ARRA can be used to help the general population secure the tools they need to promote and protect their mental health, and to assist people living with, or at risk of, mental illness as they navigate these difficult times. Only with explicit report language will Congress strengthen and ensure the success of the economic recovery and rebuilding plan. Mental health and wellness are essential to the ability of our citizens to maintain and obtain employment, to our families as they address new and serious financial stressors, and our communities as they deal with rising unemployment, foreclosures, and suicides related to the economic downturn.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

David L. Shern, Ph.D
President and CEO, Mental Health America

cc: The Honorable David Obey
The Honorable Jerry Lewis
The Honorable Daniel Inouye
The Honorable Thad Cochran
The Honorable Tom Harkin
The Honorable Arlen Specter