



United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Working to Reduce Poverty in America. July 5, 2016

Dear Representative,

I write to you today on behalf of Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA) regarding the urgent need to take the first step toward improving our nation’s mental health crisis by supporting the Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2016 (H.R. 2646).

CCUSA is a national membership organization representing 177 diocesan Catholic Charities member agencies and affiliated organizations across the country and U.S. territories. Every day these agencies see the consequences of our failure to compassionately and effectively treat those with mental illness. Last year alone, Catholic Charities agencies provided counseling, addiction treatment, and mental health services to more than 400,000 clients. Despite these efforts, nearly 40 percent of these agencies reported a waiting list of individuals wanting to receive counseling or mental health services.

Across our country 1 in 5 adults experiences mental illness annually, and 1 in 2 individuals experiences some form of depression or anxiety. This reality is a reminder that mental illness is not a problem in the margins of society but a problem experienced in every family and community. The effects of mental illness also continue to be a major hurdle in our efforts to address poverty and promote social justice. Today, 26 percent of homeless adults living in shelters suffer from serious mental illness and 30 percent of those discharged from psychiatric hospitals end up homeless within six months of release. In addition, 20percent of state prisoners and 21percent of our local prisoners have had a recent history of mental illness. These numbers are a tragic reminder that, rather than treating those suffering with mental illness, we are relegating them to our streets or prisons.

In my own capacity as a practicing clinical psychologist for the last 30 years, I have seen up close the ongoing crisis and the many ways that we as a nation have let down those suffering with mental illness in their families. I have treated the patient experiencing a psychotic episode, and I have seen the life-affirming transformation of individuals given proper and timely treatment, counseling and care.

The Mental Health Crisis Act of 2016 makes the first step in reforming and improving our fragmented mental health care system. The bill improves integration of primary care, substance abuse and mental health care; strengthens mental health parity; enhances programs for early intervention; and provides additional support for community-based mental health programs. In addition, the bill helps to clarify circumstances under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in which patient information can be shared.

The bipartisan support for this bill gives us great hope that we can take this first step forward toward comprehensive reform of our mental health system. I therefore urge you to also take this first step and to support the Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2016.

Sincerely,

Sr. Donna Markham, OP, PhD/ABPP
President & CEO
Catholic Charities USA

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