

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 21, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pence
Vice President of the United States
The White House
Office of the Vice President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Vice President Pence:

The federal government must take an immediate and aggressive approach to responding to all aspects of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This includes offering full federal support for anyone who is coping with the mental health ramifications of the response to COVID-19, with particular focus on the men and women working on the front lines, who are risking their lives by providing health care and essential services to people across the country. While there is much more the federal government must do, we write today to request you use all of the tools and resources available to the federal government to provide robust mental health and suicide prevention support. While the nation already faced a mental health and suicide crisis before the pandemic, your Administration must not, through inaction or delay, allow these challenges to spiral further out of control as a result of COVID-19.

As the country responds to COVID-19, many in the workforce have lost their jobs, transitioned to working remotely, or been asked to continue doing essential work in the face of significant health risk. This economic upheaval and social disruption has taken a toll. According to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll, nearly half of adults in the United States indicated a negative impact on their mental health stemming from concern and stress about the virus.¹ In April 2020, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Disaster Distress Hotline experienced an 890 percent increase in call volume compared to April 2019. Counselors at that call line reported speaking with callers who described feelings of isolation, financial concerns, and challenges managing stress related to balancing working from home and family responsibilities, such as remote learning. For people experiencing these challenges, every effort must be made to provide all necessary resources to help people address their mental health needs.

Additionally, people who have a mental illness are particularly vulnerable during these times. Not only are they more likely to have a chronic condition that increases their risk for a severe COVID-19 infection, but some of the mitigation strategies, such as avoiding touching one's face and frequent hand washing, can be particularly challenging for them. Furthermore, congregate care facilities, including psychiatric hospitals and nursing homes, have been among the hardest

¹ <https://www.kff.org/health-reform/press-release/brief-examines-the-covid-19-crisis-implications-for-americans-mental-health/>

hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in this country. In order to fully address this pandemic, we must protect and treat those most at risk.

This pandemic also places an unprecedented strain on our health care providers, creating unique mental health challenges. Medical professionals, including nurses and physicians, are already at an increased risk of suicide when compared to the general population.² Stressors related to a lack of access to adequate personal protective equipment, feelings of helplessness, and challenges of dealing with treating a deadly new disease, are likely to increase that risk.³ There have already been reports of health care providers dying by suicide.⁴

Effectively addressing the mental health needs and improving outcomes throughout the population requires strong national leadership. Decisive and sustained action to support those who are struggling can help ensure we prevent or minimize an increase in suicide rates in any segment of the population. That will require using all relevant resources from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), SAMHSA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Department of Defense (DOD), and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) – all of whom have expertise and experience regarding mental health and suicide prevention.

Last year, some of us wrote to Secretary Azar, asking that HHS prioritize suicide prevention efforts as a part of its public health preparedness response.⁵ The need to prioritize this effort could not be more clear in the face of COVID-19, as it demonstrates how these concerns about serious illness and harsh economic realities affect the mental health of the entire country.

The federal government should act quickly and aggressively to coordinate efforts and provide information and recommendations to people across the country, and in particular, to the frontline workers who are assisting in the overall response. We ask you to take the following steps to address the nation's mental health needs during and following the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Integrate information about behavioral health, including suicide prevention, substance use disorder, and mental health, into all relevant resources the federal government releases regarding the response to this public health emergency;
2. Include experts on mental health and suicide prevention in conversations about implementing public health preparedness efforts;
3. Harness all the suicide prevention and mental health resources from HHS, CDC, SAMHSA, DOD, VA, and other relevant agencies to assist in providing necessary mental health care, resources, and recommendations in a way that assists the population with responding to COVID-19;

² <https://www.datocms-assets.com/12810/1578319045-physician-mental-health-suicide-one-pager.pdf>;
<https://health.ucsd.edu/news/releases/Pages/2020-02-03-national-study-confirms-nurses-at-higher-risk-of-suicide.aspx>

³

https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Sustaining_Well_Being_Healthcare_Personnel_during.pdf

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/27/nyregion/new-york-city-doctor-suicide-coronavirus.html>

⁵ <https://www.help.senate.gov/ranking/newsroom/press/murray-casey-hassan-press-health-department-to-work-to-prevent-suicide-after-public-health-emergencies>

4. Ensure availability of appropriate guidance and resources for congregate care facilities, including psychiatric hospitals and nursing homes;
5. Provide resources addressing mental health needs in accessible formats to communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, including communities of color and people with disabilities; and
6. Provide resources directed at the mental health needs for frontline workers to communities across the country.

We ask you please provide our staff with an update on all of the efforts the federal government has taken so far to address mental health and suicide prevention needs as a part of the COVID-19 response and whether you will take the steps outlined in this letter. Please reach out to Laurel Sakai with Senator Murray's HELP Committee staff (laurel_sakai@help.senate.gov) with any questions.

Sincerely,



Patty Murray
United States Senator

/s/ Robert P. Casey, Jr.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



Doug Jones
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

Maggie Hassan

Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator