

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 1, 2018

The Honorable Thad Cochran  
Chairman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy  
Vice Chairman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Cochran and Vice Chairman Leahy:

As congressional leaders began deliberations on a federal budget deal, we urged them to deliver a budget that supported all Americans, including by doubling funding for key mental health priorities.<sup>1</sup> We are pleased to see that the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 responds to our request by raising “spending meant to address the opioid and mental health crisis by \$6 billion over the next two years.”<sup>2</sup>

As you begin work to allocate the first half of this funding, we urge you to use a portion of the \$3 billion available in FY2018 to substantially increase funding above FY2017 levels for two of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) most important mental health programs: the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant (MHBG) and the Programs of Regional and National Significance (PRNS).

Appropriating an additional \$1 billion for these programs would roughly double the funding level of each program compared to FY2017 and allow states and behavioral health organizations to better address the significant unmet need for mental health services and the increasing toll of the opioid epidemic. Approximately one in five adults experienced mental illness in 2015, and about 10 million Americans have a serious mental illness that substantially impacts their major life activities.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, too few Americans are able to access mental health care. In 2016, only 43% of adults in the U.S. with a mental health condition received mental health services.<sup>4</sup>

Additional funding for mental health services is critical to fighting the opioid epidemic, which killed over 42,000 individuals in 2016.<sup>5</sup> Close to half of adults dealing with a substance use disorder have a co-occurring mental illness,<sup>6</sup> and half of all Americans will experience

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, “Warren and Sanders: Who is Congress Really Serving?” *The New York Times* (December 17, 2017) (online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/17/opinion/warren-sanders-congress-serving.html>); Warren and Sanders Facebook Video (December 11, 2017) (online at: <https://www.facebook.com/senatorelizabethwarren/videos/892439107585250/>).

<sup>2</sup> Lev Facher, “NIH and Opioid Response Get Boost in Senate Budget Deal,” *STAT* (February 7, 2018) (online at: <https://www.statnews.com/2018/02/07/senate-budget-deal-nih/>).

<sup>3</sup> “Mental Health By The Numbers,” *National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)* (online at: <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-By-the-Numbers>).

<sup>4</sup> “Receipt of Services for Substance Use and Mental Health Issues among Adults: Results from the 2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health,” *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration* (September 2017) (online at: <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-DR-FFR2-2016/NSDUH-DR-FFR2-2016.htm>).

<sup>5</sup> “Opioid Overdose,” CDC (online at: <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/index.html>). Accessed Feb. 14, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> “Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health,” *SAMHSA* (September 2017) (online at: <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-FFR1-2016/NSDUH-FFR1-2016.htm#adults>).

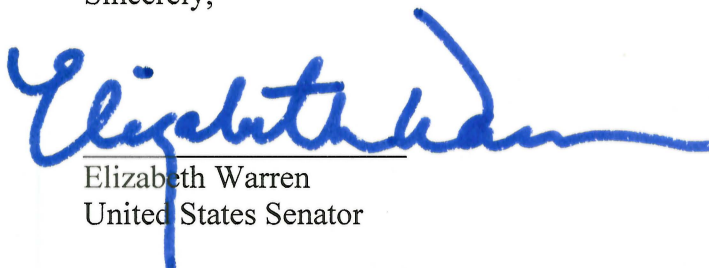
addiction or a mental health disorder in their lifetime.<sup>7</sup> In some cases, substance use disorders cause symptoms of mental illness; in others, mental illness leads to addiction; and in others, underlying factors contribute to both addiction and mental illness.<sup>8</sup>

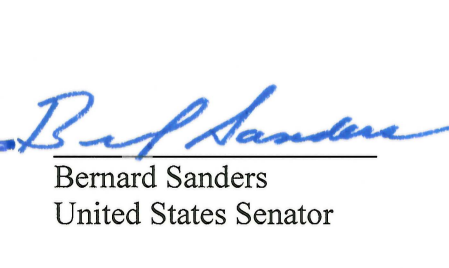
The Community Mental Health Services Block Grant (MHBG) and the Programs of Regional and National Significance (PRNS), are SAMHSA's primary mental health programs. The MHBG is the federal government's largest source of funding for mental health services, supporting the work of state mental health agencies, local governments, and nonprofits in all fifty states. Each year, the MHBG helps support services reaching about 7 million people with mental and substance use conditions.<sup>9</sup> Ten percent of these funds are dedicated to early intervention related to serious mental illness, which mental health advocates have identified as critical in helping young people with emerging psychosis continue to lead productive lives.<sup>10</sup>

The Programs of Regional and National Significance (PRNS) also support critical work to address our nation's mental health needs. For instance, Mental Health First Aid Grants have contributed to the training of more than one million teachers, police officers, healthcare professionals, and community leaders to recognize and address signs of mental health and addiction needs.<sup>11</sup> Another PRNS grant program, the Homelessness Prevention Program, supports permanent housing and supportive services for target populations, such as individuals with mental illness and addiction.

Additional resources agreed upon in the recent budget deal provide the opportunity to tackle the mental health crisis and opioid epidemic confronting our nation. We ask that you support the behavioral health needs of millions of individuals by providing an additional \$1 billion in FY 2018 in order to double funding for the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant and the Mental Health Programs of Regional and National Significance. We also urge you to consider requests from mental health stakeholders regarding support for key mental health and addiction programs that would help fight the opioid epidemic. Thank you for your consideration of these requests.

Sincerely,

  
Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

  
Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator

<sup>7</sup> Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees, FY18, *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)*, p.1 (online at: <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/samhsa-fy-2018-congressional-justification.pdf>).

<sup>8</sup> "Why do drug use disorders often co-occur with other mental illnesses?" *National Institute on Drug Abuse* (online at: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/comorbidity-addiction-other-mental-illnesses/why-do-drug-use-disorders-often-co-occur-other-men>). Accessed Feb. 14, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> SAMHSA FY18 Justification, p. 116, 122 (online at: <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/samhsa-fy-2018-congressional-justification.pdf>).

<sup>10</sup> Nick Zagorski, "NAMI Holds Briefing on Value of Mental Health Block Grants," *Psychiatric News* (November 15, 2017) (online at: <https://psychnews.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.pn.2017.11b19>).

<sup>11</sup> Erica Hoffman, "One Million People Trained in Mental Health First Aid Nationwide," *Mental Health First Aid* (May 21, 2017) (online at: <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2017/05/one-million-people-trained-mental-health-first-aid-nationwide-2/>).