

# Improving Access to Mental Health Services

Senator Tina Smith (D-MN) & Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)

*The Improving Access to Mental Health Services Act would provide mental health professionals in the National Health Service Corps with greater flexibility in where they practice and deliver care.*

The National Health Service Corps is a key part of our nation's health care system, allowing communities to recruit and retain health professionals to serve in underserved communities nationwide, including in rural, urban, and frontier areas.

Right now, NHSC professionals can only provide care at certain approved clinics and are limited in the care they can provide off site. NHSC-approved sites can be School-Based Clinics, but schools without clinics are not approved sites. The Improving Access to Mental Health Services Act, would allow Corps members, who are behavioral and mental health professionals,<sup>1</sup> greater flexibility to practice in schools, at community-based organizations, and allow for home-visiting, in order to best meet the needs of their patients and communities. These changes would especially help improve access to mental health care for children living in rural areas.

This bill would help connect children and adolescents with mental health care, by bring quality care directly into schools. According to the National Institutes of Health, mental health conditions occur in young people about as often as they do in adults—about 1 in 5 have a mental health condition—but young people frequently have a hard time accessing mental health care.

It is well established that there is less stigma, greater access, and more uptake of mental health care when it is integrated into schools. As part of school-based care, mental health professionals can offer assessments, treatment, and support with parental consent and engagement. Students receiving school-based mental health services improve in: reduced school discipline; increased social competency, resiliency, behavioral and emotional functioning; and academic performance.

This bill would also help support the provision of mental health care and improve access for patients in rural areas. Almost one quarter of all NHSC providers serve in rural areas<sup>2</sup>. By giving existing NHSC providers further flexibility in where they are able to practice and deliver care, those living in rural areas would have better access to mental health services.

National Health Service Corps (NHSC) sites are in all 50 states and currently serve about 11 million Americans. In exchange for their service and expertise, Corps members get help paying back their education loans through scholarships or loan repayment programs. NHSC approves several types of locations where Corps members can practice, and Corps members are currently restricted to only serving at those sites and are limited in the care they can provide off site.

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<sup>1</sup> "Behavioral and mental health professionals" are defined as health service psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, licensed professional counselors, marriage and family therapists, psychiatric nurse specialists, and psychiatrists.

<sup>2</sup> According to 2016 Health and Human Services data.

# Mental Health Services for Students Act of 2018

## Senator Tina Smith (D-MN)

Young people experience mental health conditions about as often as adults—about 1 in 5 struggle with severe mental health problems—but they often have a hard time getting services.<sup>i</sup> In fact, only 10 percent of people between the ages of 3 and 17 receive counseling or other services from a mental health professional.<sup>ii</sup> This is particularly concerning given that, without early identification and treatment, mental health conditions can cause young people to experience difficulties in school, social problems, and other challenges that follow them into adulthood.<sup>iii</sup>

Schools are an ideal setting to recognize students who need mental health services and quickly connect them with help. With the right training, teachers, families, and community members can make sure students are connected with any needed mental health services. And providing these services in school can help decrease the stigma and eliminate barriers—like transportation or missing class—that keep some kids from getting help.

Teachers, school staff, and families understand the importance of helping kids who are struggling with mental health problems. However, many schools—particularly in rural and underserved communities—operate on tight budgets that prevent them from being able to fund needed investments in their student’s mental health.

The *Mental Health Services for Students Act* would help schools address these challenges for students by strengthening comprehensive, school-based mental health services. Specifically, this legislation would help kids by providing funding to:

- Build partnerships between schools and community-based organizations that can help students get mental health services at school;
- Train teachers, families, and community members to recognize when a student is experiencing a mental health crisis, and make sure they get the help they need; and
- Recognize best practices for the delivery of mental health care in school-based settings and help formalize relationships between entities that support the mental and emotional health of children and adolescents in school settings.

To achieve these goals, the legislation provides \$200 million in funding to local educational agencies, tribal schools and community-based organizations to forge these partnerships and help fund these important activities. For more information, or to be added as a cosponsor, please contact Brenna Barber in Senator Smith’s office at [Brenna\\_Barber@smith.senate.gov](mailto:Brenna_Barber@smith.senate.gov).

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<sup>i</sup> National Institute of Mental Health, “Mental Illness,” *NIH* (November 2017) (online at: [https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml#part\\_155771](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml#part_155771)).

<sup>ii</sup> National Survey of Children’s Health, “Percent of Children (ages 3-17) Who Received Any Treatment or Counseling from a Mental Health Professional,” *Kaiser Family Foundation* (2016) (online at: <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/child-access-to-mental-health-care/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>).

<sup>iii</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Children’s Mental Health,” *CDC* (March 2018) (online at: <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/basics.html>).

August 2, 2018

The Honorable Tina Smith  
United States Senate  
309 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Smith:

The Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG) – a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, family members, mental health and addiction providers, advocates, payers and other stakeholders committed to strengthening Americans' access to mental health and addiction care - is pleased to support the Mental Health Services for Students Act of 2018, S. 3337.

We applaud your vision of making comprehensive school-based mental health services and supports for students available in communities across America. As you know, supporting mental and behavioral health needs early in life is critical to academic, health, and economic success, and therefore, providing an array of evidence-based services through schools is imperative. The Mental Health Services for Students Act would advance a public health approach to mental health services both in schools and in the community, and has the potential to improve the quality of life for countless children while saving an estimated \$247 billion annually by investing in early intervention programs.

The legislation builds on the highly-effective Safe Schools/Healthy Students program, which strengthens partnerships between local education agencies and community programs including, but not limited to, local primary health, juvenile justice and child welfare entities. It provides funding to place on-site licensed mental health professionals in schools across the country to provide behavioral health services for students and their families at no charge, and it supports community mental health systems to better coordinate with school-based providers, to increase school attendance and improve academic outcomes.

The legislation would also provide assistance to communities in order to create comprehensive, evidence-based, developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate, trauma-informed services that incorporate strategies of positive behavioral interventions and supports in academic settings.

According to the 2009 Institute of Medicine report on mental health prevention and promotion, 50 percent of individuals with a diagnosable mental health disorder will receive a diagnosis by age 14, 75 percent by age of 24, and most will begin experiencing symptoms years before that. And because we know mental health issues are preventable and treatable when children, youth and their families can obtain appropriate and timely services and support, the Mental Health Services for Students Act better connects health and education systems.

The MHLG is confident the legislation will help improve children's resilience and ability to succeed in life. We appreciate your leadership and look forward to working with you and your colleagues to pass this important bill.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Strong Families and Communities  
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Art Therapy Association  
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy  
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 Occupational Therapy Association  
American Orthopsychiatric Association  
American Psychiatric Association  
American Psychological Association  
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare  
Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness  
Anxiety and Depression Association of America  
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law  
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 and Action  
EMDR International Association  
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice  
Mental Health America  
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 School Psychologists  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors  
National Alliance on Mental Illness  
National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health  
National Council for Behavioral Health  
National Disability Rights Network  
National Eating Disorders Coalition  
National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health  
National League for Nursing  
Sandy Hook Promise  
Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America  
School-Based Health Alliance (SBHA) \*  
School Social Work Association of America  
The Kennedy Forum  
The Trevor Project

\*not a MHLG member