

Senatorial Perspectives: How is Congress Approaching Mental and Behavioral Health Challenges?

Christopher Holt:

For over 30 years, the Alliance for Health Policy has served as a trusted source of information and education for policy makers seeking to meet the healthcare and public health challenges facing Americans.

We were founded on the idea that progress is achieved when diverse, bipartisan, voices engage each other in dialogue. At the Alliance, we seek to bring together voices from across the political spectrum to partake in evidence based conversation focused on solutions to today's toughest policy challenges, and we strive to ensure that all voices can be heard and learn from.

We work collaboratively with our partners to provide programming that is timely and relevant to the policy community. And we actively seek to understand the priorities of administration officials and lawmakers and how we can best serve an informed policy making process. It's through that active listening process that we selected mental health as the theme for this year's 2022 signature series and today's summit.

We've heard from policy makers on both sides of the aisle, that mental healthcare is a bipartisan priority. That's because they're hearing from their constituents from coast to coast that it's time to prioritize mental health in America. As we all know, and are hearing again today, mental health impacts all aspects of our lives and society. That's something that's become even more clear throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As mental wellness emerges at the forefront of the policy conversation both sides of the aisle are focusing time and resources on achieving better outcomes.

You just participated in a conversation about the newly launched 90 day hotline, an initiative that was championed by a bipartisan group of lawmakers. Now you'll hear from Senate Finance Committee Chairman Ron Wyden and Ranking Member Mike Crapo about the bipartisan effort underway to improve care and access to behavioral health services. They understand that it's not sufficient simply to recognize problems, it takes leadership and initiative to solve them. We thank them and the members and staff who are currently hard at work, hammering out the details of a proposal to make sure that better mental health is a reality for all Americans.

Chairman Ron Wyden:

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you all about a critical priority for the health of the nation, mental health care. I want to thank the Alliance for Health Policy especially for all the work you do to develop fresh ideas that keep Americans healthy and safe.

The pandemic has put a spotlight on the challenges facing Americans' mental health. They're deep cracks now in the mental health system and the fact is the last few years have turned those cracks into canyons. I'm pleased that the Senate Finance Committee has spent this Congress working on a bipartisan basis to address the most serious barriers that are preventing Americans for getting the mental health care they need. Our effort is focused on five areas, telehealth, youth, workforce, care integration, and mental health parity. All of these areas are aimed at one objective, ensuring all Americans can get mental healthcare when they need it.

The committee has already drafted legislation for the telehealth and youth elements of the bill. And I'm hopeful that there will be more to come in the days ahead. Lots to do, but the committee has done some incredible work on a bipartisan basis to date and I'm optimistic that's going to continue.

Ranking Member Mike Crapo:

Our country has experienced a challenging few years, even as hospitalization and deaths caused by COVID-19 continue to decline and stabilize in the United States. The pandemic will have lasting impacts on the nation's mental health. Lockdowns, school closures, and other government restrictions led to social isolation, new and worsen cases of depression and widespread anxiety. For many, the pandemic also resulted in tragic personal losses, worsening these and other mental health conditions and reinforcing the need to ease access to mental health resources.

The Senate Finance Committee has engaged in a process to address mental health care shortcomings. Some of the key areas we're focused on include measures to expand access to telehealth services, support our mental health workforce and better integrate physical and mental healthcare services. The committee has released several detailed discussion drafts for feedback. We intend to make all relevant text public prior to a committee markup to ensure that it is fully vetted and accomplishes our shared goal of improving our mental health system.

One important area is telehealth. Idahoans have long understood the value of telehealth and the pandemic put a finer point on its importance. Individuals living in rural and frontier areas often face significant barriers in accessing needed mental health services closer to home. On average, rural residents have to travel farther to receive services and providers are less likely to practice in these communities. Whether for rural communities, urban areas or tribes, telehealth has undoubtedly expanded access, improved care coordination and integration and provided more privacy to patients to combat stigma.

Through emergency flexibility and permanent legislation authored by the Finance Committee in late 2020, we've taken crucial first steps toward modernizing telehealth coverage. Our telehealth discussion draft builds on these initial efforts to further break down barriers to mental healthcare. It would eliminate requirements under Medicare to receive regular in person services and allow patients to visit with their providers using audio only communication systems. Giving patients and providers more control over how mental health services are delivered, can prevent intervention delays that too often result in poor outcomes.

The past two years have also had lasting effects on the social and emotional wellbeing of children, children whose needs are unique and require carefully tailored solutions. According to recent reports from the CDC, the number of young people dealing with depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts has unfortunately risen during the pandemic. As social isolation has taken its toll on far too many children and adolescents. The Finance Committee's youth mental health working group recently issued a discussion draft that includes innovative, sustainable and concrete policy solutions to better support children and their families and their providers. These policies will improve coordinated care, support mental healthcare in schools and direct Medicaid to guide states on how they can cover treatment family care services for foster youth enrolled in Medicaid with intensive mental health needs.

These discussion drafts serve as an important foundation for a more comprehensive mental healthcare system. Senator Wyden and I are working closely with our bipartisan working group leads to address other key issues like strengthening the mental and behavioral health workforce and ensuring parity and integration among mental and physical health services. While the pandemic has increased the pervasiveness of mental health concerns. In communities across the country we have seen families, faith leaders, policy makers, and healthcare providers come together to craft creative and sustainable mental health prevention, access and treatment solutions. Congress has an opportunity to bolster these efforts.

While there is no easy solution. I'm committed to working alongside my colleagues in Congress to tackle these challenges in a bipartisan and fiscally responsible way. The Alliance for Health Policy has

been a great resource in driving change for people living with mental health challenges. And I thank you for your continued partnership in building a stronger, more accessible mental health system.

Christopher Holt:

On behalf of the Alliance for Health Policy I want to thank Chairman Wyden and Ranking Member Crapo, both for their commitment to improving mental health in our country and their partnership with the Alliance in this endeavor. As an organization our connections to Capitol Hill are crucial in allowing us to fulfill our mission to improve health and healthcare by fostering a balanced exchange of evidence, experience and varied perspectives. Thank you.