



March 23, 2023

The Honorable Michael Bennet
United States Senate
261 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Bennet:

On behalf of the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), which represents 129,600 family physicians and medical students across the country, I write to thank you for introducing the Better Mental Health Care for Americans Act.

As you know, our nation is facing a worsening mental health and substance use disorder crisis which continues to be compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and lack of access to behavioral health care. Amid a shortage of mental health professionals, family physicians are on the frontlines of providing behavioral health care to their patients. While psychiatric and other mental health professionals play an important role in the provision of high-quality mental health care services, primary care physicians are the first point of care for most patients. Nearly 40% of all visits for depression, anxiety, or cases defined as “any mental illness” were with primary care physicians, and primary care physicians are more likely to be the source of physical and mental health care for patients with lower socioeconomic status and for those with comorbidities.ⁱ

However, many primary care physicians are providing these services without the necessary support. Behavioral health integration helps to address this by ensuring patients have access to an appropriate physician-led care team and physicians have access to resources and payment that reflect the more complex care they are providing. Integrated behavioral health has shown significant cost-savings for payers and physicians, as well as more equitable access to mental health services for traditionally underserved populations.ⁱⁱ Unfortunately, while many primary care physicians want to integrate behavioral health services in their practices, they face burdensome start-up costs and payment and reporting challenges that prevent integration.

Your legislation helps address this issue by establishing a Medicare add-on code for office visits provided by primary care physicians who have integrated behavioral health into their practice. This enhanced payment recognizes the unaccounted resources required to provide integrated behavioral health care and ensures that primary care practices can sustain it. Additionally, your bill would establish a Medicaid demonstration program to ensure that all children covered by Medicaid have access to integrated behavioral health care in primary care, schools, or other critical settings. This program would provide infrastructure, technical assistance, and sustainable financing to support expanding access to integrated mental health care for children.

The AAFP is pleased to support this important piece of legislation and we stand ready to work with you to ensure Congress passes this bill to better support patients’ behavioral health needs.

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For additional information or questions, please contact Erica Cischke, Director of Legislative and Regulatory Affairs, at ecischke@aafp.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sterling N. Ransone, Jr. MD FFAFP". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sterling N. Ransone, Jr., MD, FFAFP
Board Chair, American Academy of Family Physicians

ⁱ Jetty, A., Petterson, S., Westfall, J. M., & Jabbarpour, Y. (2021). Assessing Primary Care Contributions to Behavioral Health: A Cross-sectional Study Using Medical Expenditure Panel Survey: <https://doi.org/10.1177/21501327211023871>

ⁱⁱ SY, L.-T., J, E., D, C., & PY, C. (2018). A Systematic Review of Interventions to Improve Initiation of Mental Health Care Among Racial-Ethnic Minority Groups. Psychiatric Services (Washington, D.C.), 69(6), 628–647. <https://doi.org/10.1176/APPI.PS.201700382>