



July 1, 2022

The Honorable Tina Smith
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jerry Moran
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senators Smith and Moran,

On behalf of the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) and the 127,600 family physicians and medical students across the country we represent, I write to offer our support for your legislation, the *Improving Access to Behavioral Health Integration 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.¹

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. 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 makes necessary changes to existing federal programs to ensure primary care practices can integrate behavioral health care services by providing grant funding that covers the steep start-up costs. This initial financial support is critical to improving access to integrated services and ensuring patients and payers can achieve the long-term cost savings that behavioral health integration often provides. Your legislation also prioritizes financial sustainability and ensures metrics are in place to track the progress of behavioral health integration.

The AAFP thanks you both for introducing this important piece of legislation and we stand ready to work with you to ensure Congress passes this bill. For additional information or questions, please contact Erica Cischke, Director of Legislative and Regulatory Affairs, at ecischke@aafp.org.

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ada D. Stewart, MD". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A' and 'S'.

Ada D. Stewart, MD, FAAFP
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>