

March X, 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

The undersigned organizations applaud your strong commitment to healthcare reform and share your urgency to address healthcare in 2009. We agree with your view that to succeed, reform must be comprehensive. It must provide universal coverage and access to necessary care, and utilize evidence-based strategies to improve public health and reduce costs. To accomplish our shared goals, it is imperative that adequate and equitable health responses to addiction and mental illness be part of any healthcare reform proposals that are developed and enacted on the federal level.

Millions of Americans suffer from untreated mental illness and/or addiction to alcohol and other drugs. Medical experts agree that addiction and mental illnesses are chronic diseases that can be prevented and treated effectively. We appreciate your strong support of the Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 in the U.S. Senate and your support as a presidential candidate for inclusion of mental health and addiction parity principles in national healthcare reform.

Unfortunately, less than half of the 15 million adults with serious mental illness received treatment or counseling for a mental health problem and only 18 percent of the 22.6 million people in need of help for an alcohol and/or drug use problem received any form of treatment in the past year. The financial costs and social consequences of untreated addiction and mental illness to families and communities, the healthcare system, and to our nation as a whole are staggering. For example:

- Mental health and addictive disorders are the leading cause of combined death and disability for women and the second leading cause for men.
- Untreated addiction and mental illness annually cost the U.S. \$171 billion in lost productivity.
- Approximately 120,000 deaths each year are due to harmful drug and alcohol use in the U.S., not including deaths from drug-related accidents, or associated diseases such as drug injection-transmitted HIV/AIDS.
- Adults with serious mental illness die on average 25 years sooner than those who do not have a mental illness, mainly due to untreated health conditions. Each year in America 32,000 individuals die by suicide.

- Individuals suffering with mental illness and drug and alcohol addiction often suffer from other chronic health conditions such as obesity, heart disease, pulmonary disorders, and hypertension. They are less likely to have access to health insurance and more likely to use hospital emergency rooms and other high cost and less effective alternatives to ongoing medical care.

While the impact of untreated addiction and mental illness in this country is substantial, so are the opportunities to lower healthcare costs and improve the quality of life for millions of Americans, by providing them with access to critical treatment and recovery services and expanding prevention efforts. Mental illness and addiction are preventable and treatable diseases, just like cancer, diabetes, and asthma. A large body of evidence-based studies shows that treatment for both addiction and mental illness is as effective as the treatment of other chronic diseases and results in comparable cost savings. Indeed, preventing and treating mental illness and addiction are essential to promoting wellness and health and reducing health care costs.

For these reasons, it is essential that the full continuum of mental health and addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery services are effectively incorporated into healthcare reform. Specifically, successful reform of the national healthcare system must:

- Include equitable and adequate coverage of addiction and mental health treatment and recovery support services;
- Require all public and private health insurance to cover these critical treatment and recovery services, and promote comprehensive communitywide prevention, early intervention, recovery and research for adults and youth;
- Make addiction and mental health services fully available to all those in need, including family members.

We are grateful for your strong leadership and we are optimistic that, for the first time, every American will soon have access to quality, affordable health coverage, including coverage for the full continuum of life-saving mental health and drug and alcohol addiction prevention and care. We look forward to working with you and your administration to finally make comprehensive healthcare reform a reality.

Sincerely,