

March 13, 2007

The Honorable John Dingell
Energy and Commerce Committee, Chair
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hillary Clinton
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Dingell and Senator Clinton:

We applaud your leadership in introducing the Children's Health First Act that seeks to ensure universal access to health care for our nation's children. By strengthening the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) to make affordable health care options available for all children, your bill would improve access to mental health care that is critical for healthy childhood development.

Mental disorders affect about one in five American children and five to nine percent experience serious emotional disturbances that severely impair their functioning. However, over three-quarters of children struggling with these difficulties do not receive mental health care. Lack of health insurance is one of the key barriers preventing families from getting their children the mental health services they need.

Without early and effective identification and interventions, childhood mental disorders can lead to a downward spiral of school failure, poor employment opportunities, and poverty in adulthood. Untreated mental illness may also increase a child's risk of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system, and children with mental disorders are at a much higher risk for suicide.

Discriminatory limits on mental health care also contribute to the widespread unmet need for mental health services among our children. Unfortunately, SCHIP plans across the nation include caps on both inpatient and outpatient care, annual cost restrictions, and limits on diagnostic services. These restrictions are not based on the medical needs of beneficiaries or best practice guidelines and result in coverage that is wholly inadequate for children with mental disorders. Research has shown that children with complex mental health needs would have access to full coverage of needed services in only approximately 40 percent of states due to limited benefits in the SCHIP plans.

We greatly appreciate the provision in your bill to help ensure that SCHIP plans provide equitable coverage of mental health services, and we look forward to working with you as reauthorization of the program progresses to make discriminatory limits on mental health care no longer permissible in SCHIP.

Sincerely,

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)

Mental Health America
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association of Psychiatric Health Systems
National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare