

July 15, 2009

The Honorable Henry Waxman
Chairman
House Energy and Commerce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Rangel
Chairman
House Ways and Means Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable George Miller
Chairman
House Education and Labor Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

RE: Community Mental Health Centers Strongly Support H.R. 3200

Dear Chairmen Waxman, Rangel and Miller:

On behalf of the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare – representing 1,600 Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) and other community-based mental health and addiction providers – I am writing to express our strong support for the H.R. 3200, America’s Affordable Health Choices Act. Our members serve over 6 million low-income children and adults with mental health and addiction disorders. Fully 25% of the consumers of public mental health care that we serve are uninsured.

While H.R. 3200 is a multi-faceted bill, perhaps its single most important policy change is the extension of Medicaid coverage to individuals up to 133% of poverty. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, one in five Americans below 200% of poverty have mental disorders including serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia, autism and major clinical depression. In turn, the National Council estimates that the legislation’s coverage expansions will add 2.8 million low income persons to the public mental health system and increase the patient/consumer average caseload of CMHCs by 50% upon full implementation in 2013.

There are a series of other provisions in America’s Affordable Health Choices Act that specifically address the needs of individuals with mental health and substance abuse disorders. For example, the National Council was particularly pleased that mental health and substance abuse services are mandatory in the basic package of minimum health benefits that private insurance plans must offer through the new health insurance exchange. Moreover, the application of the Wellstone/Kennedy/Domenici mental health parity law to the health care benefits offered to all uninsured persons receiving coverage through the exchange is a tremendous step forward. We are also grateful that the enrollment provisions for the exchange pay special attention to the needs of individuals with mental illnesses and cognitive impairments.

As congressional action of H.R. 3200 proceeds, we hope to have a dialogue with you on two key policy matters. First, as indicated by the estimates cited earlier, our nation needs to significantly

expand the capacity of the public mental health system. A critical first step in this effort is to update the basic statutory definition of front line mental health and substance abuse providers -- untouched since 1980 -- by authorizing Federally Qualified Behavioral Healthcare Centers (FQBHCs). The legal impact of this key no-cost policy change is to update the basic set of services provided by these entities while establishing base line data reporting and quality criteria. Behavioral health cannot be integrated into the larger health care system if we fail to meet the new accountability standards being demanded of our peers in primary care and specialty medicine.

In addition, the National Council requests that persons with serious mental illnesses served in the public mental health system be explicitly designated as a target beneficiary chronic disease patient population for the Medicaid medical home pilot authorized in H.R. 3200. Mortality data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration show that persons with conditions like bipolar disorder, psychosis and schizophrenia served by public mental health agencies die, on average, 25 years sooner than other Americans. These shocking death rates are explained by the high incidence of untreated co-occurring chronic conditions – including cancer, diabetes, heart disease and asthma – in this patient population. Clearly, we need federal help to stop this emerging public health crisis in its tracks.

In conclusion, the National Council pledges to fight side-by-side with you to ensure congressional passage of America's Affordable Health Choices Act.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Linda Rosenberg".

Linda Rosenberg, MSW
President & CEO