

Support for H 5863

March 31, 2025

Dear Chairwomen Donovan and Members of the House Health & Human Services Committee

As a child and adolescent psychiatrist, living and practicing in Rhode Island for almost 35 years in various outpatient, clinic and hospital settings. I have been concerned that so many people have difficulty finding mental health care. My experience before moving to Rhode Island taught me that severely ill patients often required a long time in a hospital. However, after moving to Rhode Island, I learned that excellent treatment can happen in a much shorter time, possibly requiring only brief, short-term hospitalization or even totally avoiding hospitals. This, of course, requires excellent and available outpatient services. Sometimes this excellent care is available, but too often it is not. Despite the high quality of mental health providers in Rhode Island, many patients with psychiatric difficulties do not get the mental health care they need and deserve. When urgent psychiatric care is needed, it is not unusual that patients are hospitalized, or their hospital stay is extended, because adequate lower or midlevel treatment is not available to prevent or shorten a hospital stay. Tragically, some patients don't receive any treatment at all. We are in a mental health crisis. The suicide rate in the United States has steadily increased over the past 20 years and is the second leading cause of death for those ages 10-14, and 20-34. Vivek H. Murthy, M.D., M.B.A. while the Surgeon General of the United States, in the 2021 *Advisory Protecting Youth Mental Health* noted the dramatic increase in depression and suicidal ideation, suicide consideration and planning, visits to emergency departments and suicide rates, even before the pandemic but with increasing rates of symptoms, during the pandemic.

Difficulty accessing care contributes to the crises. For example, Mental Health America is a leading national nonprofit organization dedicated to the promotion of mental health, well-being and illness prevention. Their 2024 edition of the *State of Mental Health in America* indicated that 1 in 5 youths had at least one major depressive episode in the past year, but over half of those did not receive treatment. The same publication ranked states on combined scores of 15 measures for youth and adults, and for prevalence and access to care measures. Rhode Island was ranked behind all other New England states on this combined rating, with Massachusetts rated the highest.

Of the factors that contribute to the lack of available providers, adequate re-imbursement for those providing this critical care is major. The provision of outpatient psychiatric care, treatment for seriously ill patients, or prevention of hospitalization, often requires a comprehensive, coordinated team of mental health providers, with different levels of education and expertise. However, these services are limited by insufficient funding. While we are fortunate in Rhode Island to have many agencies with expertise in treating psychiatric illness, those agencies are often not able to retain their skilled and dedicated employees or hire enough new clinicians. Many talented psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers do not accept insurance because of poor re-imbursements. Too many mental health clinicians leave Rhode Island for opportunities in other states where the reimbursements are more favorable, or even leave the field entirely, further depleting the mental health workforce.

I therefore strongly support this bill H5863 that requires commercial insurers to increase mental health and behavioral health reimbursement rates for in-network providers. This can make it easier for these providers to accept insurance and is a step to increasing the availability of treatment, including preventative care, which I believe benefits patients and will ultimately also save money for insurance companies.

Rhode Island has previously had a nationally recognized behavioral health system, and we can again, if we invest in all necessary levels of care and insurance companies do their part by appropriately funding the necessary workforce to provide this treatment. I believe there will be numerous benefits for our state if we move forward with this bill. In addition, this will also help to fulfill our ethical obligations and bring pride to our state for some of our care for most vulnerable citizens.

I'd like to thank Representative Teresa Tanzi for sponsoring this legislation and the committee members for your consideration. If there are questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me either by e-mail or phone

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