

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 19, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy,

Thank you for your ongoing work to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As you develop and negotiate the next legislative package to respond to this public health emergency, we urge you to prioritize the needs of states, local and tribal governments, and treatment providers who are responding to the substance use disorder (SUD) epidemic. As we continue working together to fight the COVID-19 outbreak, we must also build upon our work to combat the opioid and SUD crisis. In the next package, we respectfully request increased support for federal grants and programs aimed at opioid and substance use disorder prevention, treatment, recovery, and surveillance, and to fully support our treatment providers to prevent our addiction crisis from worsening.

The current pandemic has dramatically altered the SUD prevention, treatment, and recovery landscape in this country,¹ and the needs of patients and communities are clear. The nature of the COVID-19 public health emergency has increased social isolation and stress while decreasing access to treatment and harm reduction resources, with significant repercussions for the SUD and OUD crises.² Already, early signs from around the country indicate a higher volume of emergency calls linked to illicit drug use, as well as reported overdoses and deaths.^{3,4} Last month, Dane County, Wisconsin saw an unexpected spike in suspected opioid overdoses, prompting the County to issue an opioid overdose alert for the first time this year.⁵ New Hampshire SUD treatment and recovery providers are also concerned about the potential for increases in overdose deaths

¹ Becker, William C., Fiellin, David A., "When Epidemics Collide: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the Opioid Crisis," *Annals of Internal Medicine*, April 2, 2020. Available at: <https://annals.org/aim/fullarticle/2764312/when-epidemics-collide-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-opioid-crisis>

² Ryan, Shawn, "Economic Recovery from Pandemic Requires Investment in Recovery of a Different Kind," *Morning Consult*, April 23, 2020. Available at: <https://morningconsult.com/opinions/economic-recovery-from-pandemic-requires-investment-in-recovery-of-a-different-kind/>

³ Kaur, Harmeet, "The Opioid Epidemic was Already a National Crisis. COVID-19 Could be Making Things Worse," *CNN*, May 7, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/07/health/opioid-epidemic-covid19-pandemic-trnd/index.html>

⁴ Grinspoon, Peter, "A Tale of Two Epidemics: When COVID-19 and Opioid Addiction Collide," *Harvard Health*, April 20, 2020. Available at: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/a-tale-of-two-epidemics-when-covid-19-and-opioid-addiction-collide-2020042019569>

⁵ Wahlberg, David, "11 Suspected Opioid Overdoses Last Week in Dane County Triggers Alert," *Kenosha News*, April 8, 2020. Available at: https://www.kenoshanews.com/news/state-and-regional/11-suspected-opioid-overdoses-last-week-in-dane-county-triggers-alert/article_14adcd40-07f4-52f0-8994-46b1cf5840c3.html

during the pandemic.⁶ NEXT Distro, an online resource that provides naloxone and harm reduction tools, has identified a 300% nationwide increase in overdoses reported to their platform since March.⁷

The tremendous efforts of our states, supported by a pattern of significant federal investments, have made a difference and saved lives.⁸ Congress demonstrated a strong bipartisan commitment to addressing this epidemic through the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act (P.L. 115-271), and through recent government funding bills that prioritized targeted federal investments in SUD response funding. Importantly, the Fiscal Year 2020 (FY2020) funding legislation gave states, localities, and tribes the necessary flexibility to respond to the changing nature of this crisis by ensuring that State Opioid Response (SOR) grant funding could be used to address misuse of cocaine and methamphetamines, in addition to opioids.

Congress must continue to rise to this challenge, now exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, by significantly increasing funding in the next COVID-19 legislative package for states and localities to respond to their unique substance misuse crises. To this end, we urge you to provide \$2 billion in funding for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to administer supplemental grant allocations under the Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment (SAPT) Block Grant program and the SOR grant program. Both grants are familiar to states and providers, and may be quickly directed towards areas of greatest need within the full continuum of prevention, treatment, and recovery. We also urge Congress to grant SAMHSA all necessary authorities to ensure maximum flexibility in the use of these funds, including allowing emergency bridge funding to prevent the closure of treatment or recovery organizations; ensuring that funding may be used for the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE) for providers; facilitating the transition of providers to new treatment models and telehealth services; and permitting SAMHSA greater flexibility in the disbursement and reporting timelines for these grants. We also urge you to ensure that SOR grant dollars can be used to respond to an even broader array of substance use disorders, including alcohol misuse, in addition to opioids and stimulants.

Furthermore, it is clear that the pandemic has created new difficulties for SUD surveillance and data collection.⁹ We request a supplemental investment of \$100 million for data collection conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and states and localities through the CDC's Opioid Overdose Prevention and Surveillance activities, including the Overdose Data to Action Program, and that this funding be given flexibility to allow for surveillance of stimulant and other substance use as well. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the incredible importance of public health surveillance, and it is imperative that we continue to accurately collect and report data on SUD, overdoses, and deaths to fully monitor the shifting nature of the substance misuse crisis and ensure that we appropriately target our resources.

Finally, we fully support the efforts of our colleagues to fund many other important federal mental and behavioral health programs in the next package including those administered by SAMHSA, CDC, Health

⁶ Belanger, Olivia, "NH Drug Deaths Have Declined, but COVID-19 Brings New Uncertainty," Keene Sentinel, April 29, 2020. Available at: https://www.sentinel-source.com/news/local/nh-drug-deaths-have-declined-but-covid-19-brings-new-uncertainty/article_63c74b18-df15-53d9-a117-5ee9e9043638.html

⁷ Mallin, Alexander, "Officials Worry of Potential Spike in Overdose Deaths amid COVID-19 Pandemic," ABC News, April 15, 2020. Available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/officials-worry-potential-spike-overdose-deaths-amid-covid/story?id=70149746>

⁸ "New Data Show Significant Changes in Drug Overdose Deaths," CDC Newsroom, March 18, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/p0318-data-show-changes-overdose-deaths.html>

⁹ Becker, William C., Fiellin, David A., "When Epidemics Collide: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the Opioid Crisis," *Annals of Internal Medicine*, April 2, 2020. Available at: <https://annals.org/aim/fullarticle/2764312/when-epidemics-collide-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-opioid-crisis>

Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), and Indian Health Service (IHS) and ensure adequate support for behavioral health providers and organizations. As we look to the future, it is critical that the needs of providers are met in order to respond to the needs of those struggling with substance misuse, as well as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the strong federal investment in the past few years, the SUD epidemic continues to evolve and ravage communities across the country, and the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to exacerbate this crisis. We urge you to provide robust additional funding to fully support the needs of state, local, and tribal governments and providers as they work to prevent and treat substance use disorders during this challenging time. We appreciate your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

/s/ Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

/s/ Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/ Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

/s/ Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/ Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator

/s/ Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

/s/ Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

/s/ Tim Kaine
United States Senator

/s/ Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

/s/ Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator

/s/ Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

/s/ Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/ Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

/s/ Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

/s/ Tina Smith
United States Senator

/s/ Jack Reed
United States Senator

/s/ Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator

/s/ Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

/s/ Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator