

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

May 22, 2020

Elinore F. McCance-Katz, M.D., Ph.D.
Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use (OAS)
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Dr. Richard McKeon
Chief, Suicide Prevention Branch
Center for Mental Health Services
Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear Assistant Secretary McCance-Katz and Dr. McKeon:

The undersigned Members of Congress write to express our concern for the safety and mental health of LGBTQ youth during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. As strong supporters of SAMHSA's National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, we appreciate your efforts to ensure mental health services are available to struggling Americans. As you now work to allocate COVID-19 response resources to support suicide prevention efforts, we urge you to consider the unique impacts of the pandemic on LGBTQ youth, which are discussed below. On behalf of the six million LGBTQ youth in the United States, we respectfully request that you utilize these resources to work together with LGBTQ service providers to determine how to best support this community.

First and foremost, thank you for the significant efforts that the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has taken to address the mental health needs of our country during this global pandemic. We are particularly hopeful that the \$425 million allocated for mental health services in the CARES Act, specifically the \$50 million for suicide prevention programs, can be fully utilized to further these efforts. These resources are vital to preventing, preparing for, and responding to the mental health impacts of the coronavirus, especially for the most vulnerable populations, like LGBTQ youth.

Although youth populations may have the lowest mortality rates from COVID-19, they are not immune to the harmful impacts on mental health and well-being associated with the current

situation. Even excluding pandemic circumstances, LGBTQ youth are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide as their heterosexual peers, are at an even greater risk for depression, anxiety, and substance use. Therefore, LGBTQ youth require immediate attention from SAMHSA during these unprecedented times.

The Trevor Project, a U.S. nonprofit focused on suicide prevention within the LGBTQ youth community, published a white paper on April 3, 2020, which outlined how social distancing, economic strain, and increased anxiety as a result of COVID-19 are impacting LGBTQ youth. The loss of positive social interactions and a corresponding increase in negative social interactions from being confined in potentially abusive or unsupportive households increase the mental and physical health risks faced by the LGBTQ youth population. This report identified that LGBTQ youth need additional resources for services due to the pandemic to address anxieties, provide social support and mental health counseling, and navigate the U.S. healthcare system in a time of crisis.¹

Those who may not have a home or feel unsafe in their home can also feel especially helpless during this pandemic. Even prior to this pandemic, LGBTQ youth made up a disproportionate number of homeless young people. According to a recent report by the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, between 20% and 45% of all homeless youth identify as LGBTQ.² More specifically, for young adults between the ages of 18 to 25, LGBTQ individuals have a 2.2 times greater risk of homelessness than their non-LGBTQ peers. The report also cited several other studies that found homeless and unstably housed LGBTQ youth report higher rates of substance use or abuse, poor mental health, and physical and sexual violence.³ These staggering statistics have been exacerbated by the shutdown of schools, youth programs, and community centers as a result of the pandemic.

Because the length and impacts of this pandemic are uncertain, LGBTQ youth are among those with the greatest needs as they disproportionately experience negative mental health and suicidality outcomes related to economic downturns and recessions. Organizations serving these needs are already facing increased demand for resources and call volumes, putting additional strain on already limited resources. Without ensured access to the 24/7 specialized support that organizations like the Trevor Project provide, many lives from the LGBTQ community could be lost.

Thus, given their immediate need for additional mental health services, this coalition urges SAMHSA to utilize its CARES resources to work together with LGBTQ youth service providers to ensure the community has the resources it needs to serve the growing demand as a result of this pandemic. Your attention at this crucial time can have a life-changing effect on the mental health and well-being of a young LGBTQ person, and we thank you for your continued efforts.

¹ The Trevor Project, *Implications of COVID-19 for LGBTQ Youth Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*, (April 3, 2020) <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/2020/04/03/implications-of-covid-19-for-lgbtq-youth-mental-health-and-suicide-prevention/>

² Adam P. Romerom, Shoshana K. Goldberg, & Luis A. Vasquez, *LGBT People and Housing Affordability, Discrimination, and Homelessness*, Williams Institute UCLA School of Law, (April 2020) <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgbt-housing-instability/>

³ *Id.*, at 15.

Sincerely,



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



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Member of Congress

Brian Fitzpatrick
Member of Congress

David Cicilline
Member of Congress

Eddie Bernice Johnson
Member of Congress

Eleanor Holmes Norton
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