

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

September 3, 2020

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro,

We are writing to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) evaluate several key statistics regarding our country's mental and behavioral health workforce, namely the current size and the projected demand for mental and behavioral health workers, as well as recommend best practices for Congress and states to meet those employment demands.

The impact of mental illness on the landscape of our nation is immense. One in five adults, almost 46.6 million Americans, suffer from mental illness.<sup>1</sup> Suicide ranks among the top ten causes of death across all age groups, with 48,344 deaths attributed to suicide in 2018.<sup>2</sup> Scientists have discovered that 40% of recovered patients from the 2003 SARS epidemic were left with a psychiatric illness such as post-traumatic stress syndrome.<sup>3</sup> Recent data from the Census Bureau suggests a similar mental health epidemic due to COVID-19; over 30% of Americans are already showing signs of clinical anxiety or depression.<sup>4</sup>

While fatal drug overdoses declined slightly from 2017 to 2018, this progress has not been sustained.<sup>5</sup> In 2019, deaths from overdoses increased by 4.8% from the previous year despite our country's \$21 billion investment in efforts to end the opioid crisis.<sup>6</sup> This trend has only been

---

<sup>1</sup> "Mental Illness." *National Institute of Mental Health*. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> "Suicide and Mortality Rate Data Tables." *CDC*, 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db362-tables-508.pdf#1>.

<sup>3</sup> Lam, Marco Ho-Bun. "Mental Morbidities and Chronic Fatigue in Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Survivors." *Archives of Internal Medicine*, vol. 169, no. 22, American Medical Association (AMA), Dec. 2009, p. 2142. *Crossref*, doi:10.1001/archinternmed.2009.384.

<sup>4</sup> "Mental Health - Household Pulse Survey - COVID-19." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> "Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 1999–2018." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, January 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db356.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> "Vital Statistics Rapid Release - Provisional Drug Overdose Data." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>.

exacerbated by the pandemic; data indicate an 11.4% increase in fatal overdoses in the first quarter of 2020.<sup>7</sup>

Mental and behavioral healthcare providers are critical to supporting individuals with mental illness and substance use disorders, as well as those struggling in school, in abusive relationships, or facing a wide variety of other stressors. Unfortunately, there are severe shortages of professionals in these fields, and we are currently unable to meet our communities' needs. A 2017 report from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) shows current shortages of both adult and child psychiatrists and predicts shortages of over 10,000 providers each for adult psychiatrists and addiction counselors in 2030.<sup>8</sup> Psychiatrists and addiction counselors offer essential services. Shortages of these providers undermine our ability to respond to the impacts of the opioid epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic.

The federal government has taken steps to observe this vital industry. Reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics on workforce size and from HRSA on the supply and demand of various healthcare professions<sup>9</sup> are helpful to understand the gaps in the workforce. In order for us as policymakers to best address the identified shortages, we request a GAO report outlining the following information:

1. Using HRSA's database as a starting point, what is known about how many of each of the following mental and behavioral healthcare providers are currently actively practicing in the workforce? Please include demographic data where available, including gender, race and ethnicity, number of years in practice, state of practice, and practice setting (e.g. solo practitioner, academic setting).
  - a. Adult psychiatrists, child and adolescent psychiatrists, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, psychologists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, addiction counselors, mental health counselors, and school counselors
2. What are the five- and ten-year projected demands for professionals in the fields listed above, stratified by geographic region?
  - a. What modifications to projections has HRSA made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What is known about barriers, incentives, and levers on the state and federal levels to:
  - a. Increase the number of individuals entering into these professions?
  - b. Incentivize individuals trained in these professions to remain in practice?
  - c. Ensure that the mental and behavioral health workforce reflects the national population in terms of gender and race/ethnicity?

<sup>7</sup> Ehley, Brianna. "Fatal Overdoses Climbed to Record High in 2019, Reversing Historic Progress." *Politico*, 15 July 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/15/drug-overdoses-record-high-363719>.

<sup>8</sup> "Behavioral Health Workforce Projections, 2017-2030." *HRSA.Gov*, <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bhw/nchwa/projections/bh-workforce-projections-fact-sheet.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> "Occupational Employment Statistics." *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, <https://www.bls.gov/oes/tables.htm>.

- d. Ensure that the mental and behavioral health workforce is adequately distributed to meet regional needs, including in rural and urban underserved communities?
- e. Incentivize mental and behavioral healthcare providers to accept reimbursement from both public and private insurers and offer low-cost services for the uninsured?
- f. Maximize the treatment capacity of the mental and behavioral health workforce, such as through telehealth?

As part of this analysis, we would encourage you to take into account the role of Graduate Medical Education (GME) slots and possible incentives, such as student loan repayment programs, to both enter into one of these professions and practice in an underserved area.

Thank you very much for your help with this important concern. If you have any questions, please contact Amanda Guiliano at [amanda.guiliano@mail.house.gov](mailto:amanda.guiliano@mail.house.gov) with the office of Congressman Trone.

Sincerely,



David Trone  
Member of Congress



Frederica S. Wilson  
Member of Congress



Anna G. Eshoo  
Member of Congress