

April 27, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
U.S. Capitol, H-222
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
U.S. Capitol, S-230
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
U.S. Capitol, H-204
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Senate Minority Leader
United States Senate
U.S. Capitol, S-221
Washington, DC 20510

RE: COVID-19 Relief for Social Workers and Underserved Communities

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

On behalf of the 110,000 members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), thank you for your ongoing leadership in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As you develop the next legislative package to address this unprecedented crisis, we urge additional funding to address the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on underserved communities, and to support our professionals, who are essential workers on the front lines in responding to COVID-19.

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. We are the largest provider of mental health and substance use disorder services and are instrumental in identifying and addressing social care needs. We work in a variety of settings, including hospitals, primary care settings, nursing homes, social services departments, schools, child welfare, juvenile justice, group homes, correctional facilities, and in private clinical practice. Social workers also play a key role in advancing social justice, and NASW has a [broad portfolio](#) on which it advocates at the national and state levels.

We ask that Congress prioritize the following in developing additional COVID-19 relief:

Address the Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Underserved Communities

We are deeply concerned that communities of color are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 because of pre-pandemic inequities in economic opportunity and health care access, among other disparities. We ask

Congress to act quickly to protect all communities of color and direct the necessary resources to mitigate the spread of the virus by increasing the availability of testing; ensuring access to equitable treatment; and disseminating timely, relevant, and culturally appropriate public health information.

Another area of concern is the requirement that people seeking tests have an order by a physician or other qualified health care provider. Many people of color are uninsured or lack access to primary care. We urge you to establish a nationwide toll-free hotline staffed by health care personnel who are able to discuss symptoms of COVID-19 and provide referrals for testing. Furthermore, NASW urges Congress to require the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to collect racial and ethnic demographic data on testing and treatment for the coronavirus.

Social Worker Safety and Access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Many social workers, despite working shoulder to shoulder with their hospital colleagues in caring for people with COVID-19, do not have access to optimal PPE. Inadequate COVID-19 testing resources puts these social workers at even further risk of exposure to the virus. Moreover, many social workers continue to provide an array of services in person to clients in their communities who have urgent and critical social service, mental health, and health care needs. Public child welfare social workers and Adult Protective Services social workers, for example, continue to conduct abuse and neglect investigations that require visiting clients in the community. Home health social workers also continue home visiting practices, often serving older adults who are especially at risk for COVID-19. Conducting these activities without PPE not only puts these social workers at risk of exposure to the virus, but also puts their clients, coworkers, families, and communities at risk as well. We call on Congress to enact further protections for these workers by mandating that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) develop a temporary emergency standard and by enacting other policies to ensure that social workers have access to PPE and COVID-19 testing.

Hazard Pay for Social Workers

NASW urges increased compensation for social workers, other health care and social service workers, and other essential personnel placing their health and safety at risk in order to continue providing services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social workers are among the lowest paid professionals, despite their extensive education and training, for which many social workers incur substantial student loan debt. NASW supports premium pay increases for essential frontline workers and urges Congress to ensure that social workers be included in any hazard pay legislation.

Medicare Beneficiary Access to Health and Mental Health Services

Medicare beneficiaries urgently need access to clinical social worker (CSW) services that can prevent and help ease the negative mental and physical health impacts of the pandemic.

First, beneficiaries in skilled nursing facilities (SNFs) need access to psychotherapy provided by CSWs. Social distancing requirements have contributed to intense loneliness and social isolation among SNF residents, thereby exacerbating residents' risk of anxiety, depression, and suicidality. Currently, residents receiving SNF services under Medicare Part A cannot simultaneously receive psychotherapy services from an independent CSW under Part B.

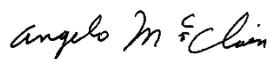
Second, beneficiaries need access to CSW services to help them cope with and recover from acute or chronic physical conditions, such as COVID-19. Millions of people with disabilities and older adults face major emotional and psychosocial concerns that arise because of a medical condition (such as a diagnosis of cancer or an exacerbation of asthma) and are unrelated to a mental health condition. Health and Behavior Assessment and

Intervention (HBAI) services, which are provided by a variety of health and mental health practitioners, can help mitigate the impact of these medical conditions, thereby decreasing risk for and complications from COVID-19. However, Medicare beneficiaries cannot access Health and Behavior Assessment and Intervention (HBAI) services provided by CSWs, even though such services are within CSWs' scope of practice.

To address these two access barriers for Medicare beneficiaries, we urge Congress to include these policy changes, which are addressed within the *Improving Access to Mental Health Act* (S. 782/H.R. 1533), to enhance Medicare beneficiaries' access to CSW services during and after this crisis.

Thank you again for your ongoing leadership in responding to COVID-19. If you have any questions, please contact Anna Mangum, Deputy Director of Programs, at amangum.nasw@socialworkers.org or (202) 336-8210.

Sincerely,



Angelo McClain, PhD, LICSW
Chief Executive Officer

CC: The Hon. John Thune, Majority Whip, United States Senate
The Hon. Dick Durbin, Minority Whip, United States Senate
The Hon. Charles Grassley, Chairman, Senate Finance Committee
The Hon. Ron Wyden, Ranking Member, Senate Finance Committee
The Hon. Lamar Alexander, Chairman, Senate HELP Committee
The Hon. Patty Murray, Ranking Member, Senate HELP Committee
The Hon. Richard Shelby, Chairman, Senate Committee on Appropriations
The Hon. Patrick Leahy, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Appropriations
The Hon. Steny Hoyer, Majority Leader, United States House of Representatives
The Hon. Jim Clyburn, Majority Whip, United States House of Representatives
The Hon. Steve Scalise, Minority Whip, United States House of Representatives
The Hon. Frank Pallone, Chairman, House Energy & Commerce Committee
The Hon. Greg Walden, Ranking Member, House Energy & Commerce Committee
The Hon. Richard Neal, Chairman, House Ways & Means Committee
The Hon. Kevin Brady, Ranking Member, House Ways & Means Committee
The Hon. Nita Lowey, Chairwoman, House Committee on Appropriations
The Hon. Kay Granger, Ranking Member, House Committee on Appropriations
The Hon. Bobby Scott, Chairman, House Education & Labor Committee
The Hon. Virginia Foxx, Ranking Member, House Education & Labor Committee