

# Act Now to Address the Mental Health Crisis & Workforce Shortages

Jewish Federations of North America and the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies Urge Congress to Prioritize the Mental Health Crisis by Supporting and Passing the Improving Access to Mental Health Act

## Background

The nation's mental health crisis continues unabated as evidenced by the rising number of communications into the 988 suicide and crisis lifeline,<sup>1</sup> as well as new [findings](#) from the Centers for Disease Control. Meanwhile, mental health workforce challenges continue to impede access to care at this time of still worsening needs.

The experiences of Jewish human service agencies reflect these national trends, with most reporting they are still facing serious mental health clinician workforce shortages that are causing long waiting lists for services and impeding their ability to grow their operations to meet these increased needs. Two key populations served by our partner agencies – older adults and now youth and young adults – have been experiencing the greatest need.

According to the [Health Resources & Services Administration](#), 160 million people – approximately one-third of the population -- live in areas lacking enough mental health clinicians, while the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) found that residents of underserved areas only have about a quarter of the mental health providers they need. Moreover, with the number of Americans ages 65 and older [projected to nearly double](#) from 52 million in 2018 to 95 million by 2060, we can expect to see even greater need among the nation's seniors.

## The Improving Access to Mental Health Act

Led by Senators Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) and John Barrasso (R-WY) and Representatives Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), the bipartisan, bicameral Improving Access to Mental Health Act will expand older adults' access to mental health services and build agency workforce capacity by authorizing Medicare to fully utilize the skills and expertise of the nation's clinical social workers to better care for our rapidly growing elderly population in three

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<sup>1</sup> According to the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#), comparing January 2023 to January 2022, answered calls increased by 57%, answered chats by 264%, and answered texts by 1608%.

important ways. Social workers constitute the largest group of mental health professionals in the country. Importantly, the bill will:

- Authorize Medicare Part B to cover Health and Behavior Assessment and Interventions (HBAI) provided by licensed clinical social workers. HBAI services help patients address the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social factors patients with acute and chronic illness or conditions experience. They include helping clients find stable housing, reliable transportation to medical appointments, and economic security -- services that Jewish human service agencies' social workers regularly provide but which are not currently reimbursed by Medicare. The [National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#) in 2019 recommended that federal programs expand social workers' approved services to address these social factors that are critical to a person's overall health. Further, CMS acknowledges that HBAI services are within clinical social workers' scope of practice.
- Allow Medicare to pay for clinical social workers' services provided in skilled nursing facilities. Under current Medicare law, social workers cannot bill independently for their services if provided in skilled nursing facilities.
- Improve recruitment and retention of social workers by raising their Medicare reimbursement rate to 85% of the Physician Fee Schedule (PFS). Medicare pays licensed clinical social workers only 75% of the PFS -- *less than* other non-physician health providers, such as occupational therapists, dietitians, and physical therapists. The bill will raise clinical social workers' reimbursement to align with that of other non-physician health providers.

### Now is the Time to Act!

The *Improving Access to Mental Health Act* will make a critical difference supporting our country's mental health workforce and enable Medicare to better serve the rising numbers of older Americans. Jewish Federations and the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies urge you to support the *Improving Access to Mental Health Act*.

Please contact [Elizabeth A. Cullen](#), Associate Director, Health Policy, Jewish Federations of North America, and Washington Representative, Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies, with any questions.

