

The Honorable Henry Waxman
Chairman
House Committee on Energy and Commerce
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-6115

Dear Chairman Waxman:

On behalf of the millions of Americans living with mental health disorders, their families and communities, the undersigned organizations strongly urge you to pass legislation reauthorizing the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

A brief survey of the behavioral health field reveals alarming levels of premature death, disability, and extremely poor social policy outcomes. As an illustration, a series of recent studies consistently show that persons with serious mental illnesses who are clients of the public mental health system **die sooner than other Americans and have an average age of death at 52**. These appalling health disparity statistics flow directly from consistent policy failures to properly integrate primary care services into community mental health settings.

Similarly, new studies show that up to 50 percent of the 2 million inmates in federal, state, and local criminal justice facilities have diagnosable mental disorders. Since roughly the early 1980's, federal and state governments have under-financed community-based services – and the unintended consequence is an informal policy of re-institutionalization that shifts persons with debilitating mental illnesses from state psychiatric hospitals to prisons and local jails. Furthermore, over the past two decades, reports from varied and respected sources, including the non-profit foundations, the Council of Governments and state agencies have concluded that up to half of the 1 million children in the nation's juvenile justice and foster care systems experience serious mental and emotional disturbances. However, the number of youth actually receiving appropriate mental health treatment in either of these systems is abysmally low.

Mr. Chairman, while the scope of SAMHSA's programming does not address all of these issues, the agency's reauthorization is a critical place to begin the funding and policy dialogue.

Our organizations recognize that you confront a challenging health agenda in the 111th Congress. However, speaking on behalf of the mental health community, let me assure you that low-income persons with mental illnesses and addiction disorders are desperately in need of federal policy action – as soon as possible. Indeed, given the conditions cited earlier in this correspondence, every day of delay quite literally costs lives.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely