

# Mental Health Liaison Group

October 14, 2005

The Honorable J. Dennis Hastert  
Speaker  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Bill Frist  
Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Speaker and Majority Leader Frist:

Congress has taken important first steps in providing for initial emergency needs created by the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The undersigned organizations look forward to working with you to ensure that remaining emergent needs are met. But it is not too early to consider and act on the lessons learned from this disaster.

Natural disasters like Katrina take an obvious toll – destroying homes, businesses and whole communities, taking lives and uprooting families. But the impact of such destruction also takes an insidious toll on mental health. Studies show that up to 30% of those exposed to a major disaster are at risk for developing mental health problems if early effective mental health services are not provided. The research shows that children are particularly vulnerable, and that failure to provide needed mental health care can lead to school failure, adjustment difficulties and continuing problems in adulthood.

Hurricane Katrina underscores the vulnerability of all Americans to mental health problems, and the need for access to services. Millions of Americans face insurance barriers to needed mental health care. President Bush declared in 2002 that unfair treatment limitations in mental health coverage deprive many Americans of effective care they need to regain their health and productivity. He stated that health insurance policies should not apply unfair treatment limitations or financial requirements on mental health benefits, and called on Congress to pass legislation to establish full mental health parity. We urge Congress to pass legislation this session to end continuing discriminatory health insurance practices that arbitrarily deny people needed mental health treatment.

The long-term emotional upheaval of a life-threatening event like a hurricane is seldom visible to us in the same way as a flooded street or a shattered building. Its effect on our long-term productivity and health are also not always apparent. Yet those who need care very often find that health insurance limits the duration of covered mental health treatment to a specified number of treatment sessions without regard to the clinical need in a way that would be unthinkable for an individual being treated for diabetes, heart disease, or even for equally “invisible” back pain. A few counseling sessions are unlikely to suffice for a suicidal person seeking to regain his or her mental health. Short-term stress management will not necessarily enable an emotionally distraught hurricane survivor to recover. Mental health care may require a longer-term process of recovery and rehabilitation, just as may be required to recover from a physical injury. Yet one

of our principal health-financing systems -- employer-sponsored insurance -- routinely and arbitrarily slams the door on a full course of treatment needed for a patient to recover and return to productive employment.

This problem, in sharper focus as a result of recent events, has been ongoing for quite some time. Without an effective federal mental health parity law, people in group health plans themselves must pay more out of pocket for medically necessary mental health care. Loopholes in the Mental Health Parity Act of 1996 continue to make accessing one's mental health benefits more expensive than one's physical health benefits. Too many people just do not have the means to bear the higher costs imposed on mental health care, and, despite having insurance coverage, have been forced to turn to Medicaid and other public programs. It is time to end such cost-shifting.

Many states have recognized the inequities in discriminatory insurance practices and have enacted mental health parity laws to give workers and their families fair access to mental health care, but far too many Americans are still not covered by such state protections and continue to have difficulty in getting the treatment they need.

As you know, the current partial parity law expires on December 31, 2005. Simply passing another extension of the law is no remedy and would further perpetuate the discrimination faced by those with mental health needs. Please work with the sponsors of the mental health parity legislation to get it passed this year.

Sincerely,

Academy for Eating Disorders  
A Chance to Heal  
Alliance for Children and Families  
Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness  
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
American Academy of Family Physicians  
American Academy of Neurology  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Academy of Physician Assistants  
American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation  
American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry  
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy  
American Association for Psychosocial Rehabilitation  
American Association of Children's Residential Centers  
American Association of Pastoral Counselors  
American Association of Practicing Psychiatrists  
American Association of School Administrators  
American Association of Suicidology  
American Association on Mental Retardation  
American College of Mental Health Administration  
American Counseling Association  
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

American Group Psychotherapy Association  
American Hospice Foundation  
American Jail Association  
American Hospital Association  
American Managed Behavioral Healthcare Association  
American Medical Student Association  
American Mental Health Counselors Association  
American Music Therapy Association  
American Nurses Association  
American Occupational Therapy Association  
American Orthopsychiatric Association  
American Osteopathic Association  
American Pediatric Society  
American Psychiatric Association  
American Psychiatric Nurses Association  
American Psychoanalytic Association  
American Psychological Association  
American Psychotherapy Association  
American Public Health Association  
American School Counselor Association  
American School Health Association  
American Society of Addiction Medicine  
American Society of Clinical Psychopharmacology  
American Therapeutic Recreation Association  
America's HealthTogether  
Anna Westin Foundation  
Anxiety Disorders Association of America  
The Arc of Salem County (NJ)  
Association for the Advancement of Psychology  
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare  
Association of American Medical Colleges  
Association of Jewish Aging Services of North America  
Association of Jewish Family & Children's Agencies  
Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs  
Association of University Centers on Disabilities  
Association to Benefit Children  
Attention Deficit Disorders Association.  
Autism Society of America  
Barbara Schneider Foundation  
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law  
Brain Injury Association of America, Inc.  
Center for the Advancement of Health  
Center for Eating Disorder Recovery (CEDaR)  
Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation  
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder  
Children's Healthcare Is a Legal Duty  
Child Welfare League of America  
Clinical Social Work Federation  
Clinical Social Work Guild 49, OPEIU  
Council on Social Work Education

County of Santa Clara, CA  
Cure Autism Now  
Dads and Daughters  
Davis Y. Ja and Associates  
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance  
Disability Service Providers of America  
Easter Seals  
Eating Disorder Center of Denver  
Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action  
Eating Disorders Institute  
Eating Disorder Referral and Information Center  
The Elisa Project  
Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems  
Families For Depression Awareness  
Families USA  
Family Voices  
Featherweight, Inc.  
Federation of American Hospitals  
Federation of Behavioral, Psychological & Cognitive Sciences  
Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health  
Freedom From Fear  
Gail R. Schoenbach/FREED Foundation  
Gurze Books  
Harvard Eating Disorders Center  
HEED/Helping to End Eating Disorders Foundation  
Human Rights Campaign  
Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research  
International Association of Jewish Vocational Services  
International Society of Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurses  
Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago  
Johnson Institute  
Kentucky Center for Mental Health Studies  
Kids Project  
Kristen Watt Foundation for Eating Disorders Awareness  
Kristin Brooks Hope Center  
Learning Disabilities Association of America  
Light For Life Foundation International  
MentalHealth AMERICA, Inc.  
Monte Nido Residential Center  
NAADAC, The Association for Addiction Professionals  
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd  
National Alliance for the Mentally Ill  
National Alliance for the Mentally Ill of New York City, Inc.  
National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association  
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health  
National Association for the Dually Diagnosed  
National Association for Personality Disorder  
National Association for Rural Mental Health  
National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders – ANAD  
National Association of Community Health Centers

National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities  
National Association of Counties  
National Association of County and City Health Officials  
National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors  
National Association of Mental Health Planning & Advisory Councils  
National Association of Psychiatric Health Systems  
National Association of School Nurses  
National Association of School Psychologists  
National Association of Social Workers  
NASW, Alabama Chapter  
NASW, Alaska Chapter  
NASW, Arizona Chapter  
NASW, Arkansas Chapter  
NASW, California Chapter  
NASW, Colorado Chapter  
NASW, Connecticut Chapter  
NASW, Delaware Chapter  
NASW, Florida Chapter  
NASW, Georgia Chapter  
NASW, Guam Chapter  
NASW, Hawaii Chapter  
NASW, Idaho Chapter  
NASW, Illinois Chapter  
NASW, Indiana Chapter  
NASW, International Chapter  
NASW, Iowa Chapter  
NASW, Kansas Chapter  
NASW, Kentucky Chapter  
NASW, Louisiana Chapter  
NASW, Maine Chapter  
NASW, Maryland Chapter  
NASW, Massachusetts Chapter  
NASW, Metro DC Chapter  
NASW, Michigan Chapter  
NASW, Minnesota Chapter  
NASW, Mississippi Chapter  
NASW, Missouri Chapter  
NASW, Montana Chapter  
NASW, Nebraska Chapter  
NASW, Nevada Chapter  
NASW, New Hampshire Chapter  
NASW, New Jersey Chapter  
NASW, New Mexico Chapter  
NASW, New York City Chapter  
NASW, New York State Chapter  
NASW, North Carolina Chapter  
NASW, North Dakota Chapter  
NASW, Ohio Chapter  
NASW, Oklahoma Chapter  
NASW, Oregon Chapter

NASW, Pennsylvania Chapter  
NASW, Puerto Rico Chapter  
NASW, Rhode Island Chapter  
NASW, South Carolina Chapter  
NASW, South Dakota Chapter  
NASW, Tennessee Chapter  
NASW, Texas Chapter  
NASW, Utah Chapter  
NASW, Vermont Chapter  
NASW, Virgin Islands Chapter  
NASW, Virginia Chapter  
NASW, Washington Chapter  
NASW, West Virginia Chapter  
NASW, Wisconsin Chapter  
NASW, Wyoming Chapter  
National Association of State Directors of Special Education  
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors  
National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare  
National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council on the Aging  
National Council on Family Relations  
National Disability Rights Network  
National Down Syndrome Congress  
National Eating Disorders Association  
National Education Association  
National Health Law Program  
National Hopeline Network  
National Housing Conference  
National Human Services Assembly  
National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty  
National Medical Association  
National Mental Health Association  
National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse  
National Network for Youth  
National Organization of People of Color Against Suicide  
National Partnership for Women and Families  
National Recreation and Park Association  
National Research Center for Women & Families  
National Rural Health Association  
National Schizophrenia Foundation  
National TASC  
National Therapeutic Recreation Society  
New Horizons  
NISH--creating employment opportunities for people with severe disabilities  
Northamerican Association of Masters in Psychology  
Obsessive Compulsive Foundation  
Ophelia's Place  
People With Disabilities Foundation  
Pennsylvania Educational Network for Eating Disorders

Physicians for Social Responsibility  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office  
Remuda Ranch  
Renfrew Center Foundation  
Rogers Memorial Hospital  
School Social Work Association of America  
Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy  
Screening for Mental Health, Inc.  
Service Employees International Union  
Society for Pediatric Research  
Society for Personality Assessment  
Society for Research on Child Development  
Society for Social Work Research  
Society for Women's Health Research  
Society of Professors of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
Suicide Awareness Voice of Education  
Suicide Prevention Action Network USA  
The Arc of the United States  
Therapeutic Communities of America  
Tourette Syndrome Association  
Union of Reform Judaism  
United Cerebral Palsy Association  
United Jewish Communities  
United Methodist Church - General Board of Church and Society  
U.S. Psychosocial Rehabilitation Association  
Wellstone Action  
Women of Reform Judaism  
Yellow Ribbon International Suicide Prevention Program