



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Pete Harckham

State Sen. Harckham, Advocates Call for Federal Resources to Aid Behavioral Health Crisis During Covid-19 Pandemic

PETE HARCKHAM April 20, 2020

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South Salem, NY – New York State Senator Pete Harckham joined statewide advocates today in calling for more resources aimed toward the growing behavioral health crises that are harming Americans during the coronavirus pandemic. Especially alarming are problems associated with protecting behavioral health providers from contracting the virus, and

safeguarding people with Substance Use Disorder and mental health issues while communities are in lockdown to stop the spread of the virus.

“While the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic continues, we also need to remember our loved ones and neighbors with behavioral health issues, whether they are living with a mental illness or Substance Use Disorder,” said Harckham, chair of the Senate Committee on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse. “There was one healthcare crisis already before this one.”

Added Harckham, “It is also important to recognize that the large community of health care workers and frontline caregivers includes those who are working with individuals in the behavioral health field, where critical resources—from funding for treatment programs to personal protective equipment—are in dire need.

“It’s time to acknowledge that those working in the behavioral health sector, and the individuals they are entrusted to help and care for, are now facing even greater challenges and risks. We must provide the funding and resources necessary to support those in need, including community members affected by the opioid epidemic, right away. Coupled with the dangers of the coronavirus, this nightmare scenario can only be thwarted with a strong, purposeful commitment to save every life we can—as with the pandemic.”

Nearly half a million Americans have died from Substance Use Disorder over the past 10 years; and the CDC reports that another 67,000 people perished in a year ending in September 2019. (For comparison, there are over 37,000 US deaths from Covid-19 so far this year.) But this crisis has not received proportional attention and funding support that the Covid-19 pandemic has; and the frontline workers in the behavioral health field, including those in addiction treatment and prevention, have been overlooked and discounted. In a field where one-on-one care and counseling are most effective, an insufficient supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) puts everyone at risk.

“Right now, workers in the behavioral health field are performing heroic work and must be considered frontline workers,” said Harckham.

Also, people with Substance Use Disorder already have problems getting treatment when it is most needed. With social distancing and self-quarantines in place, treatment options and effective medicines to stem addiction cravings are put further out of reach. People with depression and other mental health challenges are not faring well with the imposed isolation practices necessary to stop the spread of the coronavirus. All of this means a major increase in need for help from behavioral health professionals.

“Behavioral health workers are on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic and opioid overdose crisis, especially those in our residential services, putting themselves at risk to help clients and save lives,” said Amy Dorin, president and CEO of The Coalition for Behavioral Health. “We thank Senator Harckham for his strong support of the sector, and join his call for more personal protective equipment and federal funds for the sector. We must protect our essential workers.”

Following the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES)—a \$2 trillion stimulus package to provide financial relief to individuals, families and businesses—Congress is expected to propose additional financial support for municipalities and organizations impacted by the health emergency.

With this in mind, Harckham sent a letter today to members of New York’s Congressional delegation, including Senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Charles Schumer, requesting that \$38.5 billion in national emergency supplemental funding be included in the next stimulus package for direct payments to behavioral health organizations to ensure they can remain open and operating during the COVID-19 crisis.

The National Council for Behavioral Health and 40 other national groups addressing mental health and Substance Use Disorder requested the \$38.5 billion in funding last week. Without immediate support, it is feared that numerous community behavioral health organizations will be unable to serve some of the country's most vulnerable individuals.

"The human investments for those with behavioral health needs cannot be delayed any longer," said Harckham.

The funding would help stabilize the delivery of service to those who need it. Many mental health and addiction treatment centers around the country are facing long periods of lost revenue, and the emergency funding would be similar to that given to small businesses. Also, behavioral health organizations are incurring significant increased costs, from shifting to telehealth to including equipment for clients and staff, and working to keep programs open and safe during the crisis. Further, due to the economic crash, many patients have lost the ability to pay for their share of the costs of treatment.

"Substance use disorders prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery service providers are heroically addressing two pandemics simultaneously: overdose / addiction and the coronavirus," said John Coppola, executive director for the NY Association of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Providers. "Stimulus funding is critical to ensure that under-resourced programs do not collapse when they are needed most."