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September 14, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C.
20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

I write today about mental health needs and substance abuse treatment during the coronavirus pandemic. Over the past several months, I've seen reports from across Missouri describing significant increases in Narcan (Naloxone) doses deployed by emergency service providers to combat drug overdoses.¹ I am concerned that increases in social isolation, anxiety, and despair due to the pandemic may be contributing to surges in drug addiction. As your Department continues to take unprecedented action to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, I urge you to also address the mental health needs of those Americans impacted by pandemic-related disruptions.

It appears that the coronavirus pandemic has been accompanied by a rise in mental health disorders, a development that deserves serious scrutiny. According to surveys, approximately 53% of U.S. adults have reported that stress and worry brought about by the pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health.² These pandemic-related challenges have affected nearly every age category. For example, the prevalence of depression has increased markedly in college-aged students and teenagers, a group that was already experiencing worsening overall mental health.³ And for those at greatest risk for the coronavirus, such as older Americans, loneliness due to social isolation and distancing has skyrocketed.⁴

In addition, new data suggests that untreated substance abuse is increasing in kind. For those seeking care for drug addiction, reports indicate that treatment facilities are under severe strain due to pandemic-related interruptions.⁵ The American Medical Association has recently raised concerns about reports of increases of opioid-related mortality in 40 states.⁶ This is especially alarming in light of major efforts by federal and state authorities over the past several years to

¹ <https://news.stlpublicradio.org/health-science-environment/2020-05-28/st-louis-paramedics-respond-to-more-overdoses-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>; <https://www.dddnews.com/story/2828591.html>

² <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/report/kff-health-tracking-poll-july-2020/>

³ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2020/08/08/covid-19-support-youth-programs-describe-anxiety-depression-increase/5429213002/>

⁴ https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SCA_Perissinotto_06_11_2020.pdf

⁵ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/opioid-deaths-are-surgin-in-the-pandemic-heres-how-treatment-is-adapting>

⁶ <https://www.ama-assn.org/system/files/2020-07/issue-brief-increases-in-opioid-related-overdose.pdf>

reduce deaths of despair. Missouri, for example, saw a decrease in opioid-related deaths in 2019 compared to 2018.⁷ We must not allow this pandemic to reverse progress that has been made.

As you know, in the CARES Act, Congress appropriated \$425 million to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) within HHS to boost mental health and substance abuse treatment services during the pandemic. I'm encouraged by the actions SAMHSA has already taken, such as rapidly disbursing \$14 million in CARES Act funding to Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics in Missouri as well as establishing an emergency grant program targeted at suicide prevention.⁸ Yet I believe there is more that can be done to increase access to services.

I ask that you build upon these previous efforts and engage all appropriate divisions within the Department to develop guidelines and resources to assist state health departments, local officials, and practitioners seeking to treat mental health disorders and drug addiction in light of the coronavirus pandemic. I further request that you provide my office with a report on the Department's work in this area using CARES Act resources along with any legislative recommendations that may be necessary to address the unique mental health needs of Americans during this public health emergency.

Thank you for your work on this issue and your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Josh Hawley
U.S. Senator

⁷ <https://health.mo.gov/news/newsitem/uuid/a935146e-04e1-4595-b257-93d6d91c9b16/missouri-s-rate-of-opioid-deaths-decreasing>

⁸ <https://www.samhsa.gov/grants/awards/2020/SM-20-012>; <https://www.samhsa.gov/newsroom/press-announcements/202005131138>