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National Multi-Stakeholder Coalition Urges Congress to Support Socially Isolated Americans in COVID-19 Relief Package

Washington, DC – Today, the Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness, comprised of a diverse set of national organizations including consumer groups, health plans, health care providers, technology innovators, patient and family advocates, and community based organizations, strongly urged Congressional leaders to include critically important legislative provisions to directly support the millions of Americans suffering from social isolation and loneliness in any final COVID-19 relief package.

“Never before has it been more critical for Congress to pass legislation to support the millions of Americans who are experiencing social isolation and loneliness, conditions only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Andrew MacPherson, Co-Director of the Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness. “Well-prior to the global pandemic, study after study showed the profound prevalence of social isolation and loneliness in America as well as the range of serious physical and mental illnesses that co-occur with these conditions, such as serious depression, dementia, and heart disease. And not only do social isolation and loneliness come at a great cost to the health and well-being of millions of Americans, but they also cost billions of dollars to public programs such as Medicare.”²

The population of Americans experiencing negative mental health effects during the COVID-19 pandemic is substantial. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll found that nearly half (45%) of adults in the U.S. reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted due to worries and stress over the virus. Furthermore, while current physical distancing protocols are necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19, these protocols exacerbate the risk of social isolation and loneliness and related mental health complications. The same Kaiser Family Foundation study found that “significantly higher shares of people who were sheltering in place (47%) reported negative mental health effects resulting from worry or stress related to coronavirus than among those not sheltering in place (37%).”¹ As communities stay physically distant to slow the spread of the disease, Congress must help ensure access to behavioral health and social supports to mitigate these negative health effects.

As such, the Coalition calls on Congress to include the following elements in any final bill:

- Expand Medicare telehealth waivers to ensure individuals have access to critical services (*Section 303, “American Workers, Families, and Employers Assistance Act”*);
- Extend Medicare telehealth flexibilities for Federally Qualified Health Centers and Rural Health Clinics so individuals are able to receive telehealth services regardless of where they are located (*Section 304, “American Workers, Families, and Employers Assistance Act”*);
- Ensures \$4.5b to be provisioned to SAMHSA for mental health supports, substance abuse treatment, and suicide prevention. (Additional Senate Appropriations);
- Ensure \$100m to be provisioned to the Agency for Community Living, \$75m of which will be directed to Aging Network (Division A Title VI, H.R. 6800, *“The Heroes Act”*);

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation. “The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use.” 2020. See: <https://www.kff.org/health-reform/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>.

²AARP Public Policy Institute. Medicare Spends More on Socially Isolated Older Adults. 2017.

³ Bayer, Antony. “Physical multimorbidity and loneliness: A population-based study.” PLoS One. 2018; 13(1): e0191651. Accessed 7 July 2020: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5783394/>



- Increase funding for SAMHSA, HRSA, the NIMH, and CDC (Division A Title VI, H.R. 6800, “*The Heroes Act*”);
- Establish a 9-8-8 National Mental Health and Suicide hotline (Division A Title VI, H.R. 6800, “*The Heroes Act*”);
- Expanded funding for broadband infrastructure expansion/improvement (Division A Title III, H.R. 6800, “*The Heroes Act*”);
- Expanded funding for our Nation’s education system, including funds to provide school-based supports that address mental health, as well as funds to support coordination of efforts between State educational agencies and public health departments for planning, response, and recovery (Division A Title VI, H.R. 6800, “*The Heroes Act*”).

“Congress must act now and include these critically important policies to support Americans of all ages’ health and well-being during this unprecedented time,” said MacPherson.

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The Coalition to End Social Isolation & Loneliness brings together a diverse set of national organizations including consumer groups, health plans, health care providers, technology innovators, patient advocates and more to develop and advocate for federal policy solutions to address the epidemic of social isolation and loneliness. For more information, please visit: www.endsocialisolation.org.

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation. “The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use.” 2020. See: <https://www.kff.org/health-reform/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>.

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