

October 13, 2009

Honorable Debbie Stabenow
133 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Stabenow:

On behalf of Mental Health America (MHA) and our national network of more than 300 affiliates across the United States, I wanted to express our strong support for your legislative proposal to establish national centers of excellence for the treatment of depressive and bipolar disorders.

Your proposal to create the national network of centers of excellence for depressive and bipolar disorders would enhance the coordination and integration of physical, mental and social care that are so critical to the identification and treatment of depression and other mental disorders across the lifespan. The work of these centers will be an essential component in the dissemination and implementation of evidence-based practices in clinical settings throughout the country.

The goals of this initiative would be to create improved clinical care guidelines, chronic care coordination, multi-disciplinary translational research, and public-private partnerships. Publicly available national databases would be developed and community resources would be leveraged. This initiative would also encourage the use of electronic health records and telehealth technologies to better coordinate, manage, and improve access to care.

These centers are especially critical at this time given the strong evidence that economic uncertainty and recession increase the rates of psychiatric symptoms and demand for services. Depression is associated with poorer health outcomes and higher health care costs. Rates of depression and suicide – already at a staggering level of nearly 33,000 persons a year (roughly twice the number of homicides) – tend to climb during times of economic tumult. Our nation must prioritize the integration and coordination of mental health with general health care.

As you know, the lack of adequate care coordination for individuals with mental illness makes this population particularly vulnerable. For example, persons with serious mental illness die, on average, 25 years earlier than the general population, mainly due to other co-occurring chronic conditions. This proposal is an important step in an effort to decrease these distressing mortality rates and improve the quality of life for individuals experiencing mental health conditions.

MHA applauds your work on this important legislative initiative and looks forward to working with you to achieve its enactment at the earliest possible date.

Sincerely,



David L. Shern, Ph.D
President and CEO, Mental Health America