



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chairman Mark DeSaulnier (CA-11)
Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor, and Pensions Hearing
Meeting the Moment: Improving Access to Behavioral Health Care
Thursday, April 15, 2021 | 10:15 a.m.

Today, we are meeting to discuss the importance of improving access to behavioral and mental health care.

This morning's hearing comes amid a pandemic-driven surge in the demand for mental health services. Across the country, essential workers are grappling with the trauma of working through the pandemic; millions of workers are struggling with the loss of their livelihoods; and countless people have been unable to appropriately grieve the deaths of their loved ones. Overall, the number of individuals reporting symptoms of depression or anxiety has increased from 11 percent before the pandemic to 41 percent this year.

As with nearly all consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, the mental and behavioral health challenges have hit some communities harder than others. This is particularly true for people of color who entered the pandemic with disproportionately limited access to affordable health care and stable employment.

Regrettably, individuals seeking affordable mental health services are facing significant barriers that—for far too long—have kept quality mental health care out of reach for far too many people.

In fact, even before the pandemic, less than half of individuals with mental illness—and only 11 percent of individuals with a substance use disorder—received services and treatment.

This is due, in part, to the high cost of care and the nationwide shortage of mental health providers.

However, the most glaring barrier to these critical services is a health insurance system that still does not provide true, equal coverage for both mental health services and medical health services – known as mental health parity.

This barrier is particularly frustrating given the significant steps Congress has taken to get insurers to cover both behavioral and medical health services.

In 2008, for example, Congress passed the *Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act*, which prohibited large employer-sponsored health plans from placing restrictions on benefits for mental health and substance use disorder that are greater than those applied to medical and surgical benefits. And, in 2010, Congress passed the landmark *Affordable Care Act* to extend this protection to the individual insurance market.

Despite these efforts, our federal agencies still do not have the resources they need to protect and oversee millions of people's health benefits.

The Employee Benefits Security Administration investigates workplace benefits issues on behalf of more than 150 million people. Yet, its enforcement and consumer assistance budget has been frozen at less than \$150 million for several years, meaning that the agency has about one dollar to protect the health benefits of each person.

Even when they do find wrongdoing, the agency lacks the authority to penalize insurers who restrict coverage for mental health services.

In other words, our communities—particularly underserved communities—have been left to deal with the lasting and potentially fatal mental health consequences of this pandemic on their own.

This is unacceptable. One of our most basic responsibilities as elected officials is to care for the well-being of our constituents—and that means ensuring people have sufficient access to affordable behavioral and mental health care.

The first step is enforcing the laws we have already passed. We should all be able to agree that this is a step worth taking to ensure that all Americans have access to the care they need and we all benefit from. And we must take additional steps to build upon these laws to ensure that they more fully protect consumers and are as efficient at delivering services as possible. I also know that many employers, unions, health plans, and providers are rising to the challenge to meet the unique needs of workers and families during this time and we look forward to the benefit of what they are doing after the pandemic.

I look forward to hearing from our expert witnesses about solutions to securing access to equitable mental and behavioral health care for all of our constituents and all Americans.

I now recognize the distinguished Ranking Member for the purpose of making an opening statement.