

NAMI's Federal Priorities to Address COVID-19

March 18, 2020

The spread of coronavirus impacts every person in this country. We also know that people affected by mental health conditions face unique challenges during this time.

As Congress prepares a series of COVID-19-related relief bills, NAMI urges congressional leaders to ensure that people affected by mental illness can maintain their treatment, get health and mental health coverage, access needed supports, and lift up the nonprofits they depend on, like NAMI.

NAMI's priorities in COVID-19 relief legislation include:

1. Remove barriers to mental health treatment

People need ways to manage existing mental health conditions and maintain mental wellness while reducing their exposure to COVID-19. This is especially important for people with mental illness who have co-occurring medical conditions or who take medications that suppress their immune system. To address this, Congress should:

- **Eliminate all barriers to widely implementing telehealth** in all public and private health plans, including for new patients and with a wide range of mental health providers. Telehealth is an effective way to provide therapy and treatments that help people stay on the road of recovery while practicing social distancing.
- Encourage all health plans to **provide extended supplies and/or mail order refills of prescriptions**. Restrictions on prescription refills increase risk of COVID-19 exposure for people trying to maintain their mental health treatment.
- **Approve funding for Emergency Response Grants** at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which would assist states in continuing to provide treatment for people with mental health conditions and substance use disorders in response to this crisis.

2. Promote coverage for health and mental health care

People with mental health conditions are often uninsured or face barriers to getting needed treatment and supports, particularly during this time of national crisis. To address this, Congress should:

- **Launch a special enrollment period** for commercial health insurance in the Marketplace (HealthCare.gov). During this time of crisis, it is critically important that people have access to affordable, quality health care coverage.



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- **Mandate use of presumptive eligibility**, which allows certain providers like hospitals and clinics to enroll people in Medicaid whom they believe meet eligibility criteria and expand locations that are qualified to enroll. People with severe mental illness are often unable to obtain health care coverage without assistance.
- **Ensure free COVID-19 testing and treatment** for everyone who is uninsured, as well as in all commercial and government health plans. We cannot afford for people who show symptoms to not get needed treatment because of the cost.

3. Ensure safe housing for people with severe mental illness

Many people with serious conditions are living in tents, under bridges, coming in and out of shelters, or living in group homes. People with mental illness facing housing insecurity are uniquely vulnerable to being exposed to the virus, and an outbreak in shelters or encampments would exacerbate this national emergency. Additionally, many people with mental health conditions are at risk of losing housing with the loss of steady income. To help, Congress should:

- **Provide \$5 billion** to serve people who are homeless and help them stay safe and healthy during this emergency.
- **Provide an additional \$5 billion to provide rapid rehousing** for people who are at immediate risk of becoming homeless and **funding for rental assistance** to help low-income renters weather this crisis.
- **Put a moratorium on evictions.** By putting a temporary stop to any evictions or foreclosures, Congress can help ensure that renters and homeowners maintain stable housing during this crisis.

4. Support nonprofits' capacity to serve

Nonprofits, specifically 501(c)3 charitable organizations, are on the frontlines every day, serving people with mental health conditions. During the coronavirus crisis, nonprofits like NAMI organizations are struggling to meet greater demand, fill in gaps in public services and provide information and supports to people from the safety of their homes. To support nonprofits, Congress should:

- **Provide \$60 billion in emergency, targeted assistance to charitable organizations** that helps them keep their doors open during this crisis and offer paid leave to their employees. Just like small businesses, nonprofits will feel the economic burden of this crisis while their services to the community may be more critical than ever.
- Ensure that **tax credits and deductions apply to taxes that nonprofits pay**, such as payroll taxes.



- Incentivize support of America's charitable organizations by **allowing a universal charitable deduction** for contributions through the end of 2021.
- **Provide funding to charitable organizations for technology solutions** to provide virtual support services.

5. Provide paid leave to preserve health

Many people with mental health conditions are in jobs that do not have paid leave. This gap could force people to choose between giving up their paycheck to avoid spreading the virus or continue to go to work and possibly contribute to community spread. To address this, Congress should:

- Ensure that as many workers as possible have **access to paid sick and family leave**. With the current economic uncertainty, no one should have to make the choice between supporting their family or putting others at risk.

Together, we can ensure that no one in our community is left behind. Visit www.nami.org/advocacy to take action.



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