

Mental Health Op-Ed Toolkit

Writing and submitting op-eds to your local paper is easy. **First, you need an opinion to share.** In this case, it's that Congress must pass mental health reform before the end of June. **Next, you write the op-ed.** Most news outlets have a word limit (usually between 500 and 800 words). **Lastly, you submit the op-ed to the paper.** Each paper has its own process, but those are easy to find online. Just google "[Newspaper name] op-ed submission" or "[Newspaper name] submit op-ed." If all else fails, look for the Opinion or Editorial Page editor on the website's Contact or About pages.

Who?: The author should be someone who readers would trust on the issue. Ideally, the author would be a local leader of a mental health organization, advocate, provider or someone who has experience navigating the broken system (personally or on behalf of family member) coping with mental illness.

Structure: When you write your op-ed, aim to make it compelling for the average person on the street. No need to be over-technical. A good standby structure for such pieces is:

Problem: The mental health system is failing those who need it most.

This section should emotionally grab the reader. Focus on the devastating effects of the broken mental health system on patients and their families. If possible, use stories, anecdotes or statistics from your city or state to show that this isn't just someone else's problem.

Example: America's mental health system is in crisis. The people most in need of care often can't access it because of a shortage of providers and outdated rules tying the hands of the doctors and family members who could otherwise help. Still others are locked out of the system, or kicked out early, because hospitals don't have enough beds or insurance companies arbitrarily deny care. Imagine the outrage if we made it as difficult for someone with cancer to access treatment as we do someone with schizophrenia. Here in XXXX, we see.... // I've personally seen the effects here in XXX.... // XXX is no different.

Path Forward: Congress is closer than ever to passing bipartisan, comprehensive reform of our broken mental health system.

Here you can give a compelling example of how a well-run mental health system would help real people's lives, or your favorite aspects of the bill. Explain

succinctly what it would do for your state/city. Describe how fixing the system NOW would help those coping with mental illness and their families.

Obstacle/Solution: The Mental Health Reform Act is a popular, bipartisan bill that would reform our broken mental health system. Congress MUST pass real mental health reform by the end of June.

Solution: This is where you drill down on the opinion you're promoting: Congress must pass mental health reform before the end of June.

***Why June? It's a presidential election year, so Congress' focus will shift by July 4th. If the Mental Health Reform Act doesn't pass by then, it most likely means that the process will have to start all over again. If you want to pass mental health reform, it needs to happen before June.*

Mental Health Reform Act

For too long, our country has neglected the mental health of its citizens and our leaders have been silent as millions suffer on the streets, in our jails, or linger without treatment. Senators Bill Cassidy (R-La.) and Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) worked with a wide array for stakeholders to develop meaningful solutions to the weaknesses in our mental health care system and improve outcomes for families. Senators Alexander and Murray, the leaders of the Senate HELP Committee joined in the effort and helped the Mental Health Reform Act of 2016 pass unanimously in Committee. The next step is getting the bill to the Senate floor before Congress breaks for the summer.

What Does The Mental Health Reform Act Do?

The Mental Health Reform Act seeks to break down barriers for those in need of treatment for mental health services and substance abuse. It expands access and fights stigma by ensuring government, insurers, and providers approach illnesses of the mind the same way they approach illnesses of the body. And it significantly increases federal government support and investment in early intervention among adolescents and at-risk populations.

Promotes increased access to mental health care, including for at-risk populations. The bill strengthens and modernizes the government's ability to drive reforms to integrate mental and physical health care. It establishes and

strengthens grant programs to develop a new generation of mental health professionals, assists communities coordinate crisis response services, and extends services for mental health and substance abuse for homeless individuals.

Strengthens leadership and accountability for federal mental health programs. The bill requires the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to hire a Chief Medical Officer to promote best practices, set goals and report progress. It increases inter-departmental coordination so the federal government approaches mental illness in a holistic way, and elevates mental health's place within the government.

Improves patient care and integrates physical and mental health. The bill strengthens parity protections by forcing agencies to disclose past enforcement actions, developing a parity action plan between federal and state governments, and requiring new guidance to insurers on how they must comply with mental health parity laws. It includes grants to states to help break down needless barriers to integration of primary care and mental health care, helps patients' loved ones and families take a more active role in their treatment by clarifying HIPAA regulations and developing model training programs to promote increased information sharing.

Supports flexibility for states and communities to improve mental health care. The Mental Health Reform Act modernizes the mental health and substance use disorder block grants and promotes the use of evidence-based practices within states, including early interventions for individuals with serious mental illness.

Takes action to fight the national opioid epidemic. It requires NIH, CDC & FDA to implement new programs and processes to dissuade unnecessary opioid prescriptions and discover alternatives for effective pain management.