



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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ABHW COMMENTS ON PRESIDENT BIDEN'S UNITY AGENDA

Washington, DC (March 2, 2022) – The Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness (ABHW), the national voice for payers that manage behavioral health insurance benefits for over 200 million people, issued the following statement in response to President Biden's remarks on behavioral health at the State of the Union and in the Fact Sheets issued by the White House.

ABHW applauds President Biden's focus on mental health and addiction issues in his State of the Union and appreciates the President's strategy to address our national mental health (MH) and substance use disorder (SUD) crisis. We support the focus on increasing access to care and expanding evidence-based treatment, prevention, and recovery. Efforts to enhance telehealth services and launching 9-8-8, the new three-digit crisis line, are critical to addressing the immediate MH and SUD needs. Additionally, expanding school-based behavioral health services, making the Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics program permanent, funding the Collaborative Care Model and other evidence-based approaches to integrated care, and increasing behavioral health resources for justice-involved individuals will help people access the care they need to improve their well-being. Many items in President Biden's agenda are consistent with ABHW's advocacy priorities.

Specifically, ABHW looks forward to continuing to work with the Administration and Congress to:

Expand the Behavioral Health Workforce

We appreciate the focus on workforce and encourage the Administration and Congress to consider solutions that will expand access to care and address ongoing workforce shortages across the country. Passing legislation currently in Congress that would allow Medicare to cover peer support specialists, marriage and family therapists, and mental health counselors is a step toward strengthening system capacity.

Increase Access to Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD)

We commend actions by the Administration and Congress to address the overdose crisis and applaud the President's commitment and call to universal access to MOUD by 2025. The President's call to remove barriers to prescribing effective treatment, such as buprenorphine, for addiction signals that now is the time for Congress to pass the Mainstreaming Addiction Treatment (MAT) Act. We are also encouraged that the President's strategy outlined ongoing work to allow providers to treat people with SUD via telehealth.

An issue not mentioned in the President's agenda but something that would be helpful in reducing opioid use disorder deaths is amending the substance use disorder privacy laws. The

appropriate sharing of medical and behavioral health records is even more critical in times of public health emergencies like the opioid crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. We urge the Administration to immediately publish the proposed rule mandated by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to update 42 CFR Part 2.

Increase Telehealth Utilization

ABHW thanks the Administration for recognizing telehealth as a viable modality for delivering behavioral health services. ABHW supports the expansion of coverage for evidence-based telehealth services and the removal of unnecessary barriers to telehealth delivery, such as the in-person visit requirement for mental health. We agree with the Administration's proposal to allow for cross-state licensure reciprocity to expand access to care. ABHW also recommends conducting research on whether telehealth is effective for every behavioral health condition, including researching the efficacy of audio-only services.

Strengthen Mental Health Parity

ABHW applauds the Administration's increased focus on ensuring equitable coverage for mental health services. ABHW has been at the forefront of mental health parity since its inception and agrees with the goals of the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA). In regard to the President's desire to strengthen MHPAEA, we look forward to continuing to work with the Administration and regulators on additional guidance, specifically a model nonquantitative treatment limitations (NQTL) analysis.

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ABHW is the leading health plan association working to improve access and quality of care for mental health and substance use disorders. ABHW's members include national and regional health plans who care for more than 200 million people. Together we work to reduce stigma and advance federal policy on mental health and addiction care.

Member companies - Aetna Behavioral Health, AmeriHealth Caritas, Anthem/Beacon, Centene Corporation/Magellan Health, Cigna, Kaiser Permanente, New Directions Behavioral Health, and Optum.