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April 1, 2020

Governor Chris Sununu
State House
107 North Main Street
Concord, NH 03301

Dear Governor Sununu:

The COVID-19 global pandemic has placed enormous stress on our public health infrastructure, and disrupted access to health and health-related services across the country. As we continue to implement policies that mitigate exposure to the Coronavirus and protect the health and well-being of our communities, our work must go on to support those on the frontlines of the opioid epidemic as well. I support your decision to implement a stay-at-home order in New Hampshire as a means to slow the spread of COVID-19, as well as the inclusion of behavioral health providers, sober homes, and recovery centers as essential.

While their risk for contracting Coronavirus may not be elevated, those battling substance use disorder (SUD) remain a vulnerable population. Public health is a continuum, and the COVID-19 pandemic could have a severe negative impact on access to SUD treatment and recovery services. As the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services moves forward with policies to support the stay-at-home order, special consideration should be given to those with SUD.

Treatment for SUD often relies on social networks to support those in recovery, and social isolation is particularly concerning for those in recovery for addiction. SUD providers and those in treatment will need help to ensure they can maintain these networks through telehealth. Not only do treatment providers need to improve their hardware and software, but we must also ensure that the populations they serve have access to technology as well. I encourage NH DHHS to pursue grants for telehealth included in the most recent bipartisan CARES Act so people can meet virtually if need be.

For those who must seek treatment in person to receive evidence-based Medication Assisted Treatment, including methadone, further guidance should be issued for SUD providers designated as essential to ensure continuity of care for those battling opioid use disorder. At the same time, due to staff and patient shortages as a result of adhering to public health advice regarding social isolation, there's been a significant drop-off in services for SUD treatment providers. SUD providers cannot afford a reduction in funding from a decrease in reimbursable services. I encourage the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services to develop a plan to provide Medicaid SUD providers with up-front stabilization funding, which is not available under the current structure of traditional model of fee-for-service reimbursement.

I again want to reiterate my appreciation for the work of you and your team in responding to the coronavirus and for collaborating with me as the crisis evolves. I stand ready to continue working in partnership with you to ensure the safety of our Granite State communities.

Sincerely,

Ann McLane Kuster

Ann McLane Kuster
Member of Congress