

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 6, 2021

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra:

Congratulations on your recent confirmation as Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). As we look toward the light at the end of the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) tunnel, we must continue our efforts to combat a looming dual-crisis.

On October 26, 2017, the former acting secretary of HHS declared a nationwide public health emergency (PHE) as a result of the consequences of the opioid crisis. The PHE has since been renewed twelve times and is set to expire on April 7, 2021.¹ As you consider renewing the PHE, we urge you to broaden its scope to allow for a strong, compassionate response to the challenges presented by the evolving drug overdose epidemic. Additionally, we ask you to address increasing mental health needs worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The past year has weighed heavy on the American people. A once-in-a-century virus and the resulting economic downfall exacerbated multiple existing public health crises, such as the scourge of overdose deaths. Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests that drug overdose deaths accelerated during the pandemic. In the twelve months leading up to August 2020, 88,000 overdose deaths occurred, the highest ever recorded in a twelve-month period.² While synthetic opioids are considered a driver of these statistics, overdose deaths involving other drugs, such as methamphetamine and cocaine, are part of the increasing concern as well. These figures are tragic and evidence of a broader national battle with substance use.

Prior to the pandemic, we knew that substance use and mental health issues were interconnected and on the rise. Last year, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reported that co-occurring substance use and mental disorders were common, with adolescents having significant increased rates of major depressive episodes and

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Renewal of Determination That A Public Health Emergency Exists*, (www.phe.gov/emergency/news/healthactions/phe/Pages/opioids-7Jan2021.aspx) (January 7, 2021).

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, *Provisional drug overdose death counts*, (www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm) (accessed April 5, 2021).

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substance use disorders (SUD).³ In 2019, 19.3 million adults had a SUD, 51.5 million had a mental illness, and 9.5 million adults had both. These figures represented a 5.9 percent increase over 2018.⁴ For patients struggling with co-occurring disorders, it is critical to receive treatment for each, but there is a significant treatment gap. Those who do get treatment are not getting treatment for co-occurring disorders and most with co-occurring disorders get treatment for one disorder or no treatment at all.⁵

While complete data for 2020 continues to be collected and analyzed, most public health experts agree that the pandemic will have short- and long-term effects on substance use and mental health. Federal public health agencies must coordinate now to increase treatment and prevent further tragedy. We urge you to consider renewing the PHE declared to combat the opioid epidemic and broaden its scope to address the evolving drug epidemic, and use your full authority to improve upon efforts to address mental health in the United States.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to working with you and President Biden's administration on these critical issues. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us or our staff.

Sincerely,



Anne McLane Kuster
Member of Congress



Nanette Diaz Barragán
Member of Congress



Katie Porter
Member of Congress



David Trone
Member of Congress

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *The National Survey on Drug Use and Health: 2019*, (www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29392/Assistant-Secretary-nsduh2019_presentation/Assistant-Secretary-nsduh2019_presentation.pdf) (September 2020).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*