



January 31, 2022

The Honorable Tina Smith
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Smith:

On behalf of the 43,000 working Minnesotans represented by AFSCME Council 5 and the 13,000 workers represented by AFSCME Council 65, we ask that this letter be part of the congressional record of the February 1 hearing on Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders: Responding to the Growing Crisis. For too long behavioral health care has been an afterthought, leaving millions struggling to get the care they need for drug and opioid abuse, mental health, PTSD, and more. This hearing will help put this issue front and center.

AFSCME members who are certified peer recovery specialists, nurses, social workers, counselors, support staff, and other behavioral health care workers help individuals in a range of settings. It's not just a job for them; it's a calling. Our members see the services they provide can offer hope, change the trajectory of a person's life, and help repair fractured families. These workers are on the frontlines witnessing how the job loss, isolation, death, and illness from COVID have traumatized families and increased the risk for depression, anxiety, substance use disorder, and even suicidal ideation. These workers are building the resilience of our communities and healing families, one person at a time. They are ready to help our fellow Minnesotans begin that road to recovery, find their way back from a relapse, and support recovery. They are unsung heroes who deserve our respect.

As you consider developing legislation to improve our nation's capacity to respond to the growing mental health and addiction crisis, we urge you to recognize that behavioral health staff are the foundation to any solution. Funds that are designed to increase the number of behavioral health care workers are important but not enough. Low pay, unsafe working conditions, and unacceptably high caseloads are factors that contribute to burnout and high staff turnover. Staff burnout and high staff turnover result in waiting lists for treatment, inconsistent care, wasted resources, and poor results.

We need sustainable policies that ensure new funding is specifically targeted to rectify staff burnout and high turnover. This is how we can show our respect to this

workforce and the clients they serve. We stand ready to work with you to remedy this dire situation.

Sincerely,

Julie Bleyhl
Executive Director
AFSCME Council 5

Shannon Douvier
Executive Director
AFSCME Council 65