

May 6, 2014

The Honorable Ron Barber
U.S. House of Representatives
1029 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Diana DeGette
U.S. House of Representatives
2368 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Doris Matsui
U.S. House of Representatives
2434 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Grace Napolitano
U.S. House of Representatives
1610 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Paul Tonko
U.S. House of Representatives
2463 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Barber, DeGette, Napolitano, Matsui and Tonko:

The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law strongly supports the bill that you are introducing today, the Strengthening Mental Health in Our Communities Act. We thank you for your work on this important legislation that aims to improve and reform mental health service systems. This bill puts the focus of mental health reform where it belongs: on the gaps in community-based services that cause many thousands of people with serious mental illnesses to experience crises, become homeless, or endure needless institutionalization or incarceration due to the unavailability of needed help.

Your bill takes a forward-looking approach towards reforming mental health systems, focusing on creating opportunities for people with mental illnesses to succeed in integrated settings and promoting access to the community services that have been shown to lead to recovery. We also support the bill's reauthorization and full funding of the Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness (PAIMI) program, a program that plays a critical role in protecting the rights of individuals with mental health needs in education, housing, employment, health care, and other areas, as well as investigating and stopping abuse and neglect. The bill also continues other important programs funded through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, including highly successful programs that make use of peer-run services.

The creation of a White House Office of Mental Health Policy and a National Strategy on Mental Health would bring much-needed national attention to the challenges that our mental health systems have faced for years. A coordinated federal approach would also help federal agencies work together to promote a coherent national strategy and advance needed changes to mental health systems.

The Bazelon Center applauds the bill's focus on expanding high quality, intensive community services and moving away from crisis-driven systems that affords people little help until they fail and then rely on costly, late-stage, coercive interventions. We thank you for your efforts on these issues and we stand ready to work with you to advance this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert Bernstein". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Robert Bernstein
President and CEO
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law