**Join Together to Make Our Health System Better
As We Fight the Coronavirus and Address the Needs of People
with Substance Use Disorders and Mental Illness**

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) has exposed the vast shortcomings of our nation's health system and the critical importance of affordable coverage and care for all. As we mark the 10th anniversary of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which brought health coverage to 20 million people, the virus makes clear we need to protect the gains we've made and continue to advocate for a health system that enables us all to live healthy lives.

*TOP LINE MESSAGING:*
- The COVID-19 pandemic will cause the most harm to those who already face unfair and discriminatory barriers to health and health care. It reinforces that we have more work to do to build a more just, equitable system of health care.
- It's been 10 years since the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) -- the biggest advancement in health care access and consumer protection in this country since Medicare and Medicaid. As a result of the ACA's passage, 20 million more people in the United States have health coverage.
- What's all too clear right now, in the midst of the COVID-19 health crisis, is many people do not have access to the screening, prevention, treatment and comprehensive, affordable coverage they need to get and stay healthy.
- Everyone has a right to be healthy. Now is the time to protect the gains we've made, and fight for the health system changes we need so that we all can get the good quality, equitable, affordable care we need to live healthy lives.
- For many people with substance use disorders and mental illness in particular, it's been 10 years of life-saving care. Yet, there are still many others for whom treatment and recovery services remain unaffordable and out of reach. The coronavirus will make this worse.
- We need more than just free testing for coronavirus. We need a health system that provides the services and supports for people to be healthy, whether we are in a health crisis like COVID-19 or not.

*How Coronavirus affects people with substance use disorders and mental illness:*
- Many people with substance use disorders have respiratory problems related to their illness. Since coronavirus attacks the lungs, these people are at high risk.
- Practicing social distancing to prevent getting the illness makes it hard to access essential in-person services.
- Some addiction treatment currently requires daily treatment at a clinic. This and other in-person services for addiction and mental illness, may mean exposure to coronavirus.
- Crisis situations can worsen individuals' underlying health conditions, including substance use disorder and mental illness.

- Many people with substance use disorder and mental illness also experience homelessness, and are at greater risk of being in crowded environments with limited access to soap and water and other means of protecting themselves from the virus.
- The continued criminalization of substance use and mental illness means more people crowded into jails or prisons, conditions that put them at greater risk of the virus.
- Due to continued shame and stigma associated with substance use and mental illness, it is already difficult for people to seek help. Once hospitals are at capacity because of coronavirus, this could make it even harder to get treatment when needed.

### *What should policymakers do to help people with addiction and mental illness during this pandemic?*

- Programs treating substance use disorders and mental illness are already under-resourced and under-funded. Policymakers should not take any of these funds away to pay for COVID-19 needs.
- Increase access to telehealth services, covered by insurance.
- Facilitate access to essential medicines in a setting that doesn't expose patients to COVID-19.
- Expand comprehensive and crisis services for mental health or substance use emergencies.
- End arrest and incarceration of people with mental illness or substance use conditions.

### *How should Congress build on the ACA to make the health system function better during this pandemic and beyond?*

- Defend the ACA and protect Medicaid against all current threats, including the ACA repeal lawsuit, work reporting requirements, and proposals to cut Medicaid financing.
- Protect the gains we've made because of the ACA, including life-saving treatment and services for 1.8 million people with substance use disorders and mental illness.
- Expand access to recovery supports, especially in low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, rural areas, and other groups that are often left behind. Addiction and mental health treatment and services are still out of reach for many people, and inequitable across different races, incomes, genders, zip codes, and other social characteristics.
- Increase subsidies for people to buy private insurance plans through the ACA's marketplace, so they are more affordable.
- Work toward universal and affordable health insurance coverage for all illnesses, including substance use disorders and mental illness.
- Make the health system easier to navigate, and better able to meet our whole health needs by integrating services for substance use and mental illness with services for other illnesses.
- Eliminate punitive approaches to addiction and mental illness and expand pre-arrest diversion programs and wrap-around services so that people can access recovery services instead of getting arrested. Increasing access to substance use disorders treatment and services is an important step in moving away from the "War on Drugs" that continues to jail many people of color.

- Replace punitive responses to substance use and possession in schools with wrap-around services, including substance use prevention and early intervention programs. Young people of color are more likely to be disciplined, and we need to ensure that all young people are offered the support they need to live healthy lives.
- Achieve health insurance parity and end siloing of care by eliminating the remaining insurance barriers to equal treatment and billing for substance use disorders and mental illness, compared to other illnesses.
- Focus policies on all substance use disorders, not just opioids.
- Require better quality of services, using quality measures that reflect priorities of people with substance use disorders and mental illness.
- Expand prevention and early intervention services, particularly in private insurance where they are often lacking.

*Learn More:*
- [Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19](#) from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Information and Resources](#) from National Alliance on Mental Illness
- [COVID-19: Potential Implications for Individuals with Substance Use Disorders](#) from National Institute on Drug Abuse
- [Guidance for People Who Use Substances on COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus)](#) from Yale Program in Addiction Medicine, Global Health Justice Partnership, and Crackdown
- [Practicing Harm Reduction in the COVID-19 Outbreak](#) from Vital Strategies
- [COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Response & Resources](#) from The Justice Collaborative