

September 5, 2020

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Chairman, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and
Human Services, Education and Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Labor, Health
and Human Services, Education and Related
Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Blunt and Ranking Member Murray:

On behalf of the undersigned national, regional and local organizations in the maternal, children's, and mental health space who support the health and wellbeing of pregnant women and new mothers, we respectfully request the inclusion of **\$3.5M funding for a "Maternal Mental Health Hotline"** within the Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 LHHS appropriations package, as was included within the House LHHS Report No. 116-450 for H.R. 7614.

In normal times, 1 in 5 women are affected by anxiety, depression, and other maternal mental health (MMH) conditions during pregnancy or the year following pregnancy. **These illnesses are the most common complications of pregnancy and childbirth, impacting 800,000 women in the United States each year.**¹ Sadly, MMH conditions often go undiagnosed and untreated, increasing the risk of multigenerational, long-term impact on the physical, emotional, and developmental health of both the mother and child.^{2,3} MMH conditions significantly contribute to the United States' high maternal mortality rate; with recent studies showing that suicide and overdose are the leading cause of death for women in the first year following pregnancy.^{4,5} In addition to the adverse health consequences, the societal cost of untreated MMH is \$14.2 billion in the United States in 2017 from lost wages and productivity of the mother and addressing poor health outcomes of the baby.⁶

Within the current COVID-19 pandemic, pregnant and postpartum women are experiencing unparalleled levels of stress and anxiety, with a recent report showing that women who are pregnant during the pandemic being **almost twice as likely as women who were pregnant prior to the pandemic to report symptoms of anxiety and/or depression.**⁷ Equally concerning, new research has shown negative impacts on the fetal brain among pregnant women with high levels of stress.⁸ Nonprofits and clinicians supporting mothers across the nation are working extensively to meet the need. For example, the world's leading nonprofit supporting women with MMH, Postpartum Support International, has quadrupled the number of online support groups in the past six months in response to the increasingly complex and urgent requests from mothers.

Given the need both during and post pandemic, mothers and families need 24-hour, specialized support through a nationally funded hotline to address MMH conditions before it creates long lasting adverse health outcomes for both the mother and baby. Helpline qualified counselors can provide immediate support to mothers and caregivers, including education, emotional support, and connections to community resources including mental health providers with advanced training in treating MMH conditions, peers with lived experience, support groups, and other local services to support pregnant women and new mothers.

¹ Luca, D., Garlow, N., Staatz, C., & Zivin, K. (2019). Societal Costs of Untreated Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders in the United States. *Mathematica Policy Research*.

² Center for Disease Control and Prevention website. www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/depression/index.

³ Luca et al.

⁴ Metz, T., et al (2016). Maternal Deaths From Suicide and Overdose in Colorado, 2004–2012. *Obstetrics Gynecol.*

⁵ Davis N., Smoots A., Goodman D. (2019). Pregnancy-Related Deaths: Data from 14 U.S. Maternal Mortality Review Committees, 2008-2017. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁶ Luca et al.

⁷ Berthelot N., et al (2020). Uptrend in Distress and Psychiatric Symptomatology in Pregnant Women During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic. *Acta Obstetrica et Gynecologica Scandinavica*.

⁸ Wu Y., et al (2020). Association of Maternal Psychological Distress With In Utero Brain Development in Fetuses With Congenital Heart Disease. *JAMA Pediatrics*.

We respectfully request that you include the following report language from the House FY 2021 LHHS Report No. 116-45:

“Maternal Mental Health Hotline.—The U.S. suffers from one of the highest maternal death rates in the developed world. Suicide and overdose have been identified as the leading causes of death during the first year postpartum and depression is the most common complication of pregnancy in the first year postpartum. To help address these issues, the Committee includes \$3,500,000 to contract with a qualified entity to establish and maintain a maternal mental health hotline to be staffed by qualified counselors, 24 hours a day. Funding may also be used for outreach to raise awareness about maternal mental health issues and the hotline.”⁹

Access to mental health care is critical to the overall health of both mothers and their newborns – more so now than ever. While it has always been difficult for childbearing women experiencing anxiety or depression to access appropriate mental health care, the current situation – with an increase in the range and intensity of mental health issues coupled with the increased pressure on the healthcare system -- has made it even more challenging for these women to access appropriate mental health services. This modest funding will provide a critically needed and cost-effective lifeline to pregnant women and new mothers at the most medically vulnerable time in their lives.

On behalf of the 4 million parents who give birth each year in the United States, we thank you for your attention to this critical matter. Please contact Adrienne Griffen, Executive Director of Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance at agriffen@mmhla.org should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

National Organizations

2020Mom

Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance

Postpartum Support International

⁹ H.R. 7614 (Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies (LHHS) Appropriations Act, 2021’s House Report No. 116-450) included \$3 million for a hotline (later increased via House Floor Amendment to \$3.5 million) to provide a specialized hotline for this group of high-risk women.