



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
1024 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-3001
WWW.DEUTCH.HOUSE.GOV

DISTRICT OFFICES:
2500 NORTH MILITARY TRAIL
BOCA RATON, FL 33431
(561) 988-6302

MARGATE CITY HALL
5790 MARGATE BLVD.
MARGATE, FL 33063
(954) 972-6454

TAMARAC CITY HALL
7525 NW 88TH AVENUE
TAMARAC, FL 33321
(954) 597-3990

January 31, 2013

The Honorable Don Gaetz
212 Senate Office Building
404 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100

The Honorable Will Weatherford
420 The Capitol
402 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1300

The Honorable Christopher L. Smith
200 Senate Office Building
404 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100

The Honorable Perry E. Thurston, Jr.
316 The Capitol
402 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1300

Dear President Gaetz, Minority Leader Smith, Speaker Weatherford, and Minority Leader Thurston:

The tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut has turned the attention of many Americans to the grave inadequacies in our nation's mental health care system. I applaud the steps that you have already taken to investigate the massive shortfalls in Florida's mental health care system. While improving access to mental health care is only one facet of what must be a far more comprehensive effort to prevent more horrific gun violence, our State faces an historic opportunity to expand access to affordable mental health care in Florida by fully leveraging the federal resources available to us with the expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

The severity of the inadequacies of Florida's mental health system was revealed in a report last year by the Florida Council for Community Mental Health for the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF). Florida ranks 49th in the country in per capita funding for mental health care, and spends less in inflation-adjusted dollars on mental health services now than it did in the 1950s. The national average for per capita mental health care spending is \$129; Florida spends just \$39. This lack of funding is not for lack of need, for nearly two-thirds of all Floridians suffering from mental illness go untreated.

The overall physical toll of mental illness is well documented. Serious mental illness is linked to higher rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, drug abuse and other chronic diseases. The compounding effects on overall health result in a 25-year reduction in life expectancy. Additionally, the cost of untreated mental illness bears down not only on those families who suffer through it but on all Floridians through its negative impact on our economy, our schools, and public safety. Researchers at Harvard University Medical School estimate that untreated mental illness costs the U.S. economy at least \$105 billion in lost productivity every year. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), untreated mental illness among children contributes to failure in school, with approximately 50 percent of students labeled with emotional or behavior disorders dropping

out before graduation. After leaving school, mentally ill youth often struggle with substance abuse and then entrance into our already overburdened criminal justice system. NAMI estimates that caring for prisoners with mental illness costs the nation an average of \$9 billion annually, and crimes by individuals suffering with untreated mental illness have contributed to unnecessary incarcerations and overcrowding in jails and prisons.

There is no question that expanding and improving mental health care in Florida will leave our communities healthier, safer, and more productive. However, for patients, advocates, providers, and policymakers, there remains a very real question about whether the Florida legislature will take advantage of the historic opportunity afforded by the ACA to fundamentally improve mental health care in Florida. Both the expansion of coverage through Medicaid and the launch of a health insurance exchange that will have to abide by mental health parity requirements for private insurance represent an unprecedented opportunity for Florida to improve access to mental health care.

Despite the passage of the Wellstone-Dominici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Act in 2008, which was signed into law by President Bush, the lack of final parity regulations have enabled insurance companies to avoid providing their customers with mental health benefits on par with medical and surgical benefits. With President Obama's announcement that his comprehensive gun violence reduction plan will include the issuance of mental health parity regulations, the launch of state insurance exchanges in 2014 as part of the ACA will mean that millions of soon-to-be insured Floridians will have improved access to affordable health care that includes equal coverage for treating mental illness. As insurance companies are no longer able to skirt the spirit of the 2008 landmark parity law, Floridians who already have private insurance will no longer be denied life-saving mental health or addiction care.

However, with the prevalence of serious untreated mental illness more common among low-income families, it is the ACA's expansion of Medicaid that represents the most dramatic, cost-effective opportunity to improve access to care in Florida. Currently, Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program cover 60 million Americans, including 3.4 million Floridians. The Affordable Care Act would extend eligibility for Medicaid to individuals earning up to \$14,856, and families of four earning an average of \$30,656. The ACA would expand eligibility for Medicaid to approximately 800,000 to 1.3 million Florida residents and would mark the first time low-income Floridians without children would be guaranteed coverage.

If the Florida legislature is truly serious about addressing Florida's mental health care crisis in the wake of the mass shootings in Newtown, Aurora, and other communities, it is time lawmakers acknowledge that there is no more cost-effective or economically advantageous strategy than expanding eligibility for Medicaid. With federal matching funds covering 100 percent of the expansion from 2014 through 2016, and tapering to 90 percent in 2020, Florida would spend only \$3 billion over ten years – an increase in spending of just 1.8 percent – and in doing so expand access to health care for over a million Floridians. According to the Center for Fiscal and Economic Policy, each dollar of Florida's spending over the course of the first decade after Medicaid expansion would also leverage an additional \$9.51 billion in federal funding, directly stimulating the economy and creating an estimated 65,000 private-sector jobs in the first six years alone. Medicaid expansion would also be a boon to Florida's private sector businesses, as employers in some of Florida's largest

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industries would benefit from the fact that so many of their workers would be eligible for Medicaid coverage.

Rejecting this funding to make a political point would send billions of dollars paid for by Floridians through their income taxes to other states. If Florida decides to pass on this opportunity, we will lose \$20.3 billion in federal Medicaid funding without making any improvement in coverage for patients in need. And that need is dire. The Florida Department of Children and Families currently serves 300,000 patients with mental illness at a cost of \$722 million per year. DCF estimates that two-thirds of these patients would be newly eligible for access to mental health care through Medicaid if the new rules were implemented, and state costs would be slashed. Those DCF funds could be better spent on expanding treatment programs that are proven to improve the lives of Floridians with mental illness. When patients receive appropriate treatment, success rates for even the most serious mental health disorders are similar to outcomes in physical health care.

Legislatures around the country have convened early this year, many of them expressing interest in lessening barriers to mental health care as a method of preventing future tragedies like Newtown. While it is unfortunate that horrific violence had to spur a renewed interest in mental health care, more and more states are coming to the conclusion that the federal funds provided under the ACA are too important to the health and safety of their citizens, and their budgets, to pass up. Arizona and North Dakota have recently voted to include Medicaid expansion in their state budgets, joining 20 other states that will expand coverage. Floridians deserve the same.

With estimates of 778,000 adults and 140,000 adolescents and children suffering from serious mental illness in our state, and 50 percent of Floridians expected to experience some form of mental illness in their lifetime, we have an obligation, and an opportunity, to develop a system of mental health care coverage and delivery that serves as a model for the rest of the country. Expansion will spur economic growth and create new jobs, lower insurance premiums for consumers in the private market, and help hospitals and providers better serve those in need. And if early detection and treatment of mental illness helps saves lives in anyway, whether it is through the prevention of suicides or a reduction in crime rates, we should move forward without hesitation.

For the benefit of all Floridians, I respectfully request that you move forward with expansion of access to treatment for mental illness by fully implementing the Affordable Care Act and offer you my assistance in anyway.

Sincerely,



Ted Deutch
MEMBER OF CONGRESS