

December 7, 2023

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education,
Labor, and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education,
Labor, and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy,

Bipartisan Policy Center Action (BPC Action) commends you for your steadfast commitment to pursuing bipartisan solutions to the behavioral health and opioid crises facing the nation. BPC Action encourages all members to continue with this cross-party collaboration in passing the **SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Reauthorization Act**. This reauthorization marks an important moment in the ongoing federal effort to combat the opioid epidemic.

For years, the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) has been developing policy solutions to improve the federal response to the nation's [behavioral health and substance use disorder crises](#). BPC's work so far has focused on optimizing federal spending pertaining to the opioid crisis, strengthening behavioral health integration with primary care, leveraging telehealth services to address behavioral health and substance use disorder, and establishing the nation's mental health crisis response system.

Earlier this year, BPC released an [issue brief](#) outlining four major policy areas for Congress' consideration in reauthorizing the SUPPORT Act: enhancing community-based programs; maintaining Medicaid coverage for high needs patients; updating behavioral health metrics; and improving workforce capacity. BPC Action is pleased to see that the legislation currently being considered by the Senate HELP Committee includes bipartisan priorities linked to each of these four areas.

The bill reauthorizes several key programs aimed at prevention, treatment, and recovery for substance use disorder, including efforts to train first responders, support training and workforce programs, and building on recovery centers and leveraging peer support and recovery specialists. BPC Action supports reauthorizing these critical and lifesaving programs.

BPC Action also urges the committee to consider BPC's proposal on integrating demonstration grants to strengthen community-based addiction services at no additional cost to maximize whole-of-government resources. BPC Action recommends that Congress direct the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) to spearhead this effort. Given that it has the authority to coordinate across the executive branch, ONDCP is well-positioned to reduce government-wide fragmentation by guiding agencies according to service needs. ONDCP can ensure agencies with complementing expertise that manage similar programs across the government coordinate to maximize their resources.

Also, BPC Action believes certain additions can help improve the federal effort to address the ongoing epidemic:

- Sec. 210 requires the Attorney General to issue regulations within one year of enacting the special registration for teleprescribing of controlled substances. **BPC Action recommends that data from the Prescription Drug Management Program (PDMP) be used to populate the special registration to ensure there is a data reporting system while avoiding additional administrative burden.**
- Sec. 211 ensures compliance with mental health parity rules. The bill requires the Department of Labor’s Office of the Inspector General to issue a report on “actions to implement parity requirements.” **BPC Action proposes that Congress expand the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA) to cover Medicare and Medicare Advantage beneficiaries and allocate funding for parity enforcement for Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) plans.**
- Sec. 306 codifies the Office of Recovery at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. **BPC Action commends the committee for including this crucial provision and urges the committee to consider adding provisions from the *Providing Empathetic and Effective Recovery (PEER) Support Act*.** To build on this policy, BPC Action recommends Congress instruct the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Department of Justice (DOJ) to conduct a study to research states’ screening processes for prospective peer specialists with past interactions with law enforcement and direct the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to revise the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system to recognize peer specialists as a profession.

BPC Action applauds the committee for assembling this critical legislation that will bolster the federal response to the opioid crisis. We appreciate your leadership on this issue and look forward to working in a bipartisan manner to enact these vital policies.

Sincerely,



Michele Stockwell
President
Bipartisan Policy Center Action