

The **UNITED STATES SENATE**
COMMITTEE on FINANCE
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing on Protecting Youth Mental Health

As Prepared for Delivery

On behalf of Senator Crapo and myself, it's our hope that this morning's hearing on the state of mental health for our youth serves as a wake up call. Millions of young Americans are struggling under a mental health epidemic. Struggling in school. Struggling with addiction or isolation. Struggling to make it from one day to the next.

Our country is in danger of losing much of a generation if mental health care is business as usual. For families across America, this is the issue that dominates their kitchens and living rooms. With the Children's Health Insurance Program and Medicaid, the largest payer of mental health care for our young, within this committee's jurisdiction, the Finance Committee must step up with solutions.

I hear way too many heartbreaking stories from parents and young people at Oregon town meetings, at the grocery store and at the schools I've visited all over the state. I'm certain that's the way it is for every member of the committee.

Imagine being a parent scrambling desperately to find help for your kid who's in crisis -- who may be a danger to themselves or somebody else. Too many parents are making call after call only to learn that there aren't any beds available. Or that the waitlist to see a psychiatrist could be weeks or months long. Or they're told that their insurance company won't pay for the care a psychiatrist says their child needs.

The law requires equality between coverage for physical health and coverage for mental health. Too many families are put through bureaucratic torment when they try to use that coverage -- coverage they pay for. Your kid is suffering, the insurance company takes thousands of dollars in premiums out of your pocket, and you get little more than jazz in your ear while you sit on hold.

There is new urgency for Congress to step up the fight against this epidemic. Diagnosing an issue and getting the right care for young people was already too difficult before anyone had heard of Covid-19. The crisis is even larger today. Kids are feeling isolated and depression is up. Suicide attempts are up. An estimated 140,000 children have lost a parent or a caretaker to Covid-19, and that number will continue to rise.

The bottom line is, every loving parent wants what's best for their child, so as a nation, shouldn't we have that same level of concern for our young? That same level of commitment?

We're fortunate to be joined this morning by Surgeon General Dr. Murthy, who has been a crusader for improving mental health care for our children. He's going to help us attack this challenge from all sides, including how to help families navigate a broken, complicated mental health care system. How to respond to a young person in crisis without demonizing or criminalizing them. How to build on what's proven to work when it comes to health care for kids, specifically CHIP and Medicaid.

I also want to address the road ahead for the Finance Committee. For several months, we've been working on a bipartisan basis to break down the big policy challenges in mental health care. With today's hearing, the Finance Committee is ramping up our legislative efforts as a group. Several of our members have graciously agreed to partner on specific policy challenges, one Democrat and one Republican. The goal is to produce a bipartisan bill this summer that brings all that work together.

Senators Carper and Cassidy are going to focus on the subject of today's hearing, mental health care for America's children. Senators Stabenow and Daines will work together on building up the mental health care workforce, which is far too limited to meet our needs today. Senators Cortez-Masto and Cornyn will look at how to make mental health care more seamless, because too many people today are falling through the cracks of a fractured system. Senators Bennet and Burr will look at how to ensure that mental health care gets finally treated the same way as physical health care. Senators Cardin and Thune will team up on making it easier to get mental health care via telehealth.

The north star for this effort is achieving what the committee talked about in a hearing last year. Everybody in America must be able to get the mental health care they need when they need it.

In the coming weeks, the full committee will stay busy with hearings featuring mental health experts and advocates, as well as families who can share with us their own experiences with mental health challenges.

This morning's hearing will be the first of two that put a special focus on our youth. I'm looking forward to our discussion. Again, I want to thank Dr. Murthy for joining us, and I'll turn it over to Senator Crapo for his opening remarks.

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