

February 5, 2021

The Honorable Charles D. Baker  
Governor, Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Massachusetts State House  
24 Beacon St., Room 280  
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Baker,

Congratulations on your selection as a recipient of Mental Health America's B4Stage4 Award. Your work to improve access to behavioral health care in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is commendable, and we hope you will appreciate another opportunity to further this objective in the weeks and months ahead.

As leaders of organizations dedicated to improving mental health for all Americans, ending the COVID-19 pandemic through mass vaccinations must be policymakers' top priority. Yet, as you know, widespread grief, job loss, isolation, and education disruptions are causing unprecedented mental health and addiction struggles across the country, including in Massachusetts. Defeating COVID-19 without also taking aggressive steps to tackle the mental health consequences of the pandemic will weaken our long-term recovery, resulting in additional deaths of despair that reach far beyond the pandemic.

We are grateful for your actions to open mass-vaccination sites for Massachusetts residents, including at the historic Fenway Park, the Reggie Lewis Track and Athletic Center, and Gillette Stadium. Scaling up vaccinations is urgently needed to save lives and bring the pandemic to an end. We are mindful of the challenges in establishing and operating vaccination sites, and we believe, having mounted the effort, that these sites offer another important opportunity: to engage with Commonwealth residents who may be experiencing mental health and substance use challenges. While nothing should be allowed to slow down vaccinations, the 15 minutes after a vaccination is administered, when individuals are being monitored for (rare) adverse reactions, could be used to screen for mental health and substance use challenges and/or provide information about accessing behavioral health care in the Commonwealth. Screening tools such as the PHQ-2 for depression and SBIRT (Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment for Substance Use) can be administered quickly and help to identify individuals who may be in need of treatment.

Similarly, individuals waiting for COVID-19 tests could be given mental health and substance use screens, and reminders for second shots could also direct people to mental health education, online screening and other resources. Where in-person screening is not possible, online screening programs could be made available. For example, over seven million people have been provided screening, education and support at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org). Screening data can also help identify communities and groups with elevated need to guide public health responses. The lack of near real-time data in this realm makes it nearly impossible to target responses that could—like with infectious diseases—prevent small increases from rapidly growing.

In addition to utilizing vaccination and testing sites, we urge you take steps to address the mental health crisis facing our young people. Students with unmet mental health needs will not be prepared to learn simply because their schools will eventually reopen for in-person learning. States must take aggressive steps to help school districts identify and assist students experiencing trauma and other

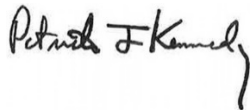
mental health challenges. In the longer term, every public school should have a K-12 mental health curriculum, embed social-emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom, train all school staff, and have set up Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports with adequate school mental health staff.

Finally, we urge you to take steps to improve Massachusetts' response to suicide and mental health crises. For generations, our country's response to individuals having a mental health crisis has been to send law enforcement, who are usually ill-equipped to respond, through the 9-1-1 system. Too often, needless arrests, confinement, and even deaths have resulted, particularly for Black Americans. With recent designation of the new 9-8-8 Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Crisis Hotline, states have a historic opportunity to build a real mental health crisis response system where clinicians, rather than police officers, respond to stabilize crises, deploy mobile crisis teams, and connect individuals with longer-term treatment, supportive housing, supported employment, and other services necessary to advance recovery.

We understand that you and Secretary Sudders will soon release a roadmap for ambulatory behavioral health treatment system redesign and hope these suggestions are supportive of your initiative. Massachusetts can be a national leader in creating such a robust mental health crisis response system. We believe waiting on any of these areas will mean missed opportunities. COVID-19 is an unprecedented crisis, which is why it demands an unprecedented, comprehensive response. There is no health without mental health.

Thank you for your leadership. We stand ready to assist you in any way we can.

Sincerely,



Patrick J. Kennedy  
Former U.S. Representative (D-RI)  
Founder, The Kennedy Forum



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