

U.S. Sens. Tina Smith, Jerry Moran Introduce Bipartisan Legislation to Improve Access to Behavioral Health Care

Bill would allow primary care providers to address physical and mental health needs, expand access to behavioral health services

WASHINGTON – This week, U.S. Senators Tina Smith (D-MN) and Jerry Moran (R-KS) introduced bipartisan legislation to expand access to behavioral health care. The bill would make it easier for patients to receive behavioral health services in their primary care setting, which would make mental health care more affordable and accessible.

“When I experienced depression, resources were there for me. But right now, too many people don’t have access to the behavioral health care they need,” said Senator Smith. **“We need to start treating mental health with the same urgency we treat physical health, and that starts by making sure everyone who needs help can get it. This bill will help primary care providers treat both physical and mental health so that care is more accessible for everyone.”**

“Primary care physicians have a relationship with their patients that is built over years through trust and familiarity,” said Sen. Moran. **“Integrating mental and behavioral health care into primary care settings will help provide Americans with easier access to mental health services through a familiar health care touchpoint. This legislation would supply primary care physicians with the resources necessary to begin merging mental health care into primary care settings to better serve patients.”**

“With the increase in people struggling with their mental health and a mental health workforce crisis there is a great need to promote integrated options,” said Sue Abderholden, Executive Director of NAMI Minnesota. **“This means having mental health professionals in primary or pediatric care offices to eliminate barriers and provide early intervention.”**

“Primary care doctors often serve as the first point of contact for patients facing behavioral health challenges,” said Sterling Ransone, President of the American Academy of Family Physicians. **“Behavioral health integration in primary care is vital to providing patients with the whole person care they deserve, but practices often face steep costs and lack the support to integrate behavioral health services. The provisions of this bill will provide more primary care practices with the resources they need for meaningful practice transformation.”**

“The Bipartisan Policy Center and Bipartisan Policy Center Action endorses the Improving Access to Behavioral Health Integration Act and applauds Sen. Smith and Sen. Moran for their leadership in advancing bipartisan proposals to address the mental health challenges facing the country,” said the Bipartisan Policy Center in a statement. **“This bill would provide financial assistance to support the integration and expansion of behavioral health care in primary care, especially in underserved areas. Recognizing the strong connection between physical and behavioral health, the Bipartisan Policy Center has**

focused on breaking down barriers to integrating primary and behavioral health care. BPC and BPC Action looks forward to working with Congress to pass this bill.”

Integrating primary care and behavioral health care would reduce barriers to access for those in need of mental health care. Addressing both physical and mental health in primary care settings can also be cost-effective for patients and health care providers. However, this model of integrated care has been challenging to implement. Specifically, primary care providers often lack the financial resources to hire behavioral health professionals or cover upfront costs.

Senators Smith and Moran’s *Improving Access to Behavioral Health Integration Act* amends an existing federal program to expand access to integrated care. Specifically, this legislation would:

- Establish a federal grant program for primary care practices to implement evidence-based behavioral health integration programs.
- Prioritize support for practices that demonstrate financial sustainability of behavioral health integration programs and have the capacity to expand access to mental health and substance use disorder services in medically underserved areas. Preference is given to small practices with fewer than 15 clinicians.
- Require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to develop evidence-based metrics and reporting requirements to measure the uptake of behavioral health integration models by primary care practices.
- Direct the Secretary to consult with primary care and behavioral health professionals and patient advocates when developing measures and performance metrics.
- Require the Secretary to publish evaluation results and identify best practices to scale successful behavioral health integration models.

The Improving Access to Behavioral Health Integration Act is endorsed by: American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work, American Association on Health & Disability, American College of Osteopathic Neurologists and Psychiatrists, American College of Physicians, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, American Osteopathic Association, American Psychological Association, Anxiety and Depression Association, Bipartisan Policy Center, Clinical Social Workers Association, Girls, Inc., International Society of Psychiatric Nurses, Lakeshore Foundation, Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance, Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute, Minnesota Association of Community Mental Health Programs, National Alliance on Mental Illness, National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health, National Association for Children’s Behavioral Health, National Association of Social Workers, National Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders, **NHMH – No Health without Mental Health**, and SMART Recovery.