

Mental Health Liaison Group

April 3, 2012

Honorable Kent Conrad
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Conrad:

The undersigned national behavioral health organizations of the Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG) applaud you for introducing legislation to delete the word “lunatic” from Federal law. The MHLG is a coalition comprised of national mental health and addiction organizations, representing consumers, family members, advocates, professionals and providers. We advocate on behalf of individuals with, or at risk of, a mental health or substance use condition, including service members, veterans, and their families.

This legislation recognizes the considerable stigma that is associated with mental health conditions. The continued use of outdated and offensive terms, such as “lunatic,” which are utilized in some parts of the US code to refer to individuals with mental health conditions only serve to perpetuate this stigmatization. This legislation shines a spotlight that these references have no place in federal law and reflects a more contemporary and deeper understanding of mental health conditions. Deleting these terms from usage in the US code is a simple means of demonstrating respect for individuals living with mental health conditions and will have no effect on the underlying federal laws.

The central aim of this legislation to diminish the impact of stigma cannot be overstated. Several years ago, the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health identified three obstacles in preventing individuals with mental health and substance use conditions from accessing the excellent mental services they deserve: 1. Stigma that surrounds mental illnesses; 2. Unfair treatment limitations and financial requirements placed on mental health benefits in private health insurance; and 3. The fragmented mental health service delivery system. Stigma was identified as the number one obstacle to advancing mental health issues.

The Commission on Mental Health defined stigma as a cluster of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate the general public to fear, reject, avoid, and discriminate against people with mental illnesses. Stigma is widespread and leads others to avoid living, socializing, or working with, renting to, or employing people with mental disorders. It leads to low self-esteem, isolation, and hopelessness. It deters the public from seeking and wanting to pay for care or preventive services. Responding to stigma, people with mental health problems internalize public attitudes and become so embarrassed or ashamed that they often conceal symptoms and fail to seek treatment. Stigma contributes to the wide treatment gap whereby two-thirds of adults

who need mental health treatment, don't get it, and a staggering 80 percent of young people who need treatment, don't get it.

The MHLG commends Senator Conrad, a long-time champion of mental health and addiction issues, for introducing this bill and taking an important stride in curbing stigma associated with mental health conditions.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work
American Association on Health and Disability
American Counseling Association
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
American Mental Health Counselors Association
American Music Therapy Association*
American Occupational Therapy Association
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychiatric Nurses Association
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare
Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD)*
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)
Clinical Social Work Association
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)
Eating Disorders Coalition
Everyone Reading, Inc.*
Learning Disabilities Association of America
Mental Health America
NAADAC, The Association for Addiction Professionals
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors (NACBHDD)
National Association of Mental Health Planning & Advisory Councils
National Association of Psychiatric Health Systems
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD)

National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery
National Council on Community Behavioral Healthcare
National Disability Rights Network
National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health
School Social Work Association of America
Society for Disability Studies*
Treatment Communities of America
Witness Justice

**are not MHLG members*