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The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
437 Russell Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Purdue, Durbin, Young and Coons:

On behalf of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), the national medical specialty association representing over 38,800 psychiatric physicians, I write to support the swift enactment of the Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act, S. 3599. This important legislation would facilitate vital access to health care by directing federal immigration authorities to recapture unused employment-based visas and expedite the approval of applications to meet healthcare treatment capacity needs at this critical time.

The U.S. healthcare system has long experienced shortages in the psychiatric workforce and those shortages will likely be compounded during the COVID-19 pandemic without prompt intervention. According to the Health Resources and Services Administration¹, the supply of adult psychiatrists is expected to decrease by another 20% over the next ten years, while demand for psychiatrists is expected to increase by 3%, leaving a shortage of over 12,000 fully-trained psychiatrists. But at present, many of our members who are providing needed psychiatric care in underserved communities are uncertain whether they will be able to continue to practice due to expiring visas and a green card processing backlog.

¹HRSA, "Behavioral Health Workforce Projections: 2017-2030", available at: <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bhw/nchwa/projections/bh-workforce-projections-fact-sheet.pdf>.

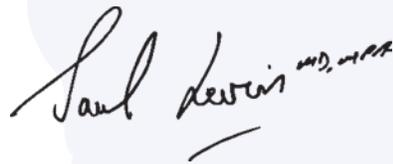
This situation leaves many individuals in need of treatment for mental health and substance use disorders (MH/SUD) at risk of being unable to access evidence-based care. According to recent data² from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, of the 47.6 million adults with a mental illness, only 43.3% of them received any form of mental health care in the past year, while only 11.1% of the people aged 12 or older who required substance use treatment received it at a facility specializing in addiction medicine.

The public health and economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic will amplify the demand for MH/SUD treatment in the coming years. By some estimates³, as many as 154,000 more people could die from drug or alcohol abuse or suicide from the economic impact of COVID-19 alone. These figures do not account for the expanded need for mental health or addiction treatment for individuals coping with the loss of a loved one due to COVID-19. Now is a critical time to augment the workforce of psychiatrists and other mental health professionals.

International medical graduates (IMGs) play a critical role in providing care across our country, particularly in mental health professional shortage areas⁴ where nearly 120 million Americans live. Approximately 30% of active psychiatrists⁵ are IMGs. Your bill ensures the availability of IMGs to provide treatment to U.S. patients by recapturing up to 15,000 unused employment-based visas for use by international physicians and providing for expedited processing of applications. Additionally, by exempting family members from numerical visa limitations, your bill ensures that IMGs who would receive a recaptured visa have their own families and support systems intact.

Thank you for your leadership in introducing S. 3599. Please let us know how we can aid your efforts to advance this legislation. If you have any questions, please contact Michelle Greenhalgh at mgreenhalgh@psych.org or at 202.459.9708.

Sincerely,



Saul Levin, MD, MPA, FRCP-E, FRCPsych

²SAMHSA, “Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health”, available at: <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf> (August 2019).

³ Petterson, Steve et al. “Projected Deaths of Despair During the Coronavirus Recession” (May 8, 2020), available at: https://wellbeingtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/WBT_Deaths-of-Despair_COVID-19-FINAL-FINAL.pdf

⁴ Health Resources and Services Administration, “Shortage Areas,” available at: <https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/shortage-areas>.

⁵ American Association of Medical Colleges, “Active Physicians Who Are International Medical Graduates (IMGs) by Specialty, 2017”, available at: <https://www.aamc.org/data-reports/workforce/interactive-data/active-physicians-who-are-international-medical-graduates-imgs-specialty-2017>.