

Improving Access to Mental Health Services

Senator Tina Smith (D-MN) & Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)

The Improving Access to Mental Health Services Act would provide mental health professionals in the National Health Service Corps with greater flexibility in where they practice and deliver care.

The National Health Service Corps is a key part of our nation's health care system, allowing communities to recruit and retain health professionals to serve in underserved communities nationwide, including in rural, urban, and frontier areas.

Right now, NHSC professionals can only provide care at certain approved clinics and are limited in the care they can provide off site. NHSC-approved sites can be School-Based Clinics, but schools without clinics are not approved sites. The Improving Access to Mental Health Services Act, would allow Corps members, who are behavioral and mental health professionals,¹ greater flexibility to practice in schools, at community-based organizations, and allow for home-visiting, in order to best meet the needs of their patients and communities. These changes would especially help improve access to mental health care for children living in rural areas.

This bill would help connect children and adolescents with mental health care, by bring quality care directly into schools. According to the National Institutes of Health, mental health conditions occur in young people about as often as they do in adults—about 1 in 5 have a mental health condition—but young people frequently have a hard time accessing mental health care.

It is well established that there is less stigma, greater access, and more uptake of mental health care when it is integrated into schools. As part of school-based care, mental health professionals can offer assessments, treatment, and support with parental consent and engagement. Students receiving school-based mental health services improve in: reduced school discipline; increased social competency, resiliency, behavioral and emotional functioning; and academic performance.

This bill would also help support the provision of mental health care and improve access for patients in rural areas. Almost one quarter of all NHSC providers serve in rural areas². By giving existing NHSC providers further flexibility in where they are able to practice and deliver care, those living in rural areas would have better access to mental health services.

National Health Service Corps (NHSC) sites are in all 50 states and currently serve about 11 million Americans. In exchange for their service and expertise, Corps members get help paying back their education loans through scholarships or loan repayment programs. NHSC approves several types of locations where Corps members can practice, and Corps members are currently restricted to only serving at those sites and are limited in the care they can provide off site.

¹ "Behavioral and mental health professionals" are defined as health service psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, licensed professional counselors, marriage and family therapists, psychiatric nurse specialists, and psychiatrists.

² According to 2016 Health and Human Services data.