ISSUE: There is growing bi-partisan consensus that now is the time to rebuild and add to critical government programs and policies to meet escalating mental health needs in the United States of America. These bills and proposals take multiple forms, have common and unique provisions, and fall under the broad heading: “mental health reform.”

BACKGROUND: High-profile and often tragic events in America’s schools, colleges and communities, particularly over recent years and the last decade, have increased the national dialogue about the need for better and more widely available mental health services and programs. In Congress and many state capitals, legislators are re-examining existing programs and proposing new ones to address unmet mental health needs.

In the U.S. House of Representatives, Rep. Tim Murphy (R-PA), who chairs the House Energy and Commerce Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, has been tireless in examining government mental health programs and proposing new responses. His detailed bill, H.R. 3717, “Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2013,” is widely regarded as a comprehensive effort to put in place new policies and redirect some Federal mental health funding to where it is most needed.

For example, Murphy’s bill would establish a new Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Abuse Disorders in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). In doing so, it would oversee the existing Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and its $3.6 billion budget. The rationale behind these and other structural reforms is to ensure the government’s response to America’s mental health needs is better coordinated and effectively administered.

The 135-page Murphy bill also includes increased funding for the Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies (BRAIN) Initiative at the NIH’s National Institute of Mental Health. His bill also would promote the translation of evidence-based medical research into better treatment protocols and programs. AACAP is working closely with Chairman Murphy as he refines his bill. We are also actively discussing specifics of a comprehensive House Democratic mental health reform bill, H.R. 4574, the "Strengthening Mental Health in Our Communities Act of 2014." Further details will be forthcoming upon introduction.

In the Senate, there is wide, bi-partisan support for S. 689, the “Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act,” sponsored by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA), Chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee. The Harkin bill re-authorizes many existing mental health programs and calls for a GAO report on the utilization of mental health services for children.

CONGRESSIONAL ASK:
• Urge the House and Senate to move comprehensive mental health reform bills through the Committee process and onto their respective floors for up-or-down votes toward enactment.
• Urge all Representatives and Senators to learn and discuss the legislative details, and debate the overwhelmingly positive merit of enacting critical mental health reform legislation this year.

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