Psychotropic medications used to treat mental illness are among the most powerful in modern medicine and they affect all parts of the body, not only the brain. Prescribing these medications for children and adolescents requires the judgment of a physician, such as a child and adolescent psychiatrist, with training and qualifications in the use of the medications in this age group. Although there is a critical shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists, allowing psychologists to prescribe medications will not improve access to mental health services. Rather, it will risk patient safety and expose more children and adolescents to inadequate care.

The Facts

- Half of all patients taking a psychotropic medication have another major illness that requires medication, creating potential for drug interactions. Without medical training, mental health providers are not equipped to understand and manage these interactions.
- If improperly prescribed, psychotropic medication can have dangerous side effects such as convulsions, epilepsy, heart arrhythmia, blood disease, seizures, coma, stroke, and even death. To prescribe these medications safely, one needs medical training to understand a patient's complete medical history, perform a medical exam, and prescribe the appropriate medication at a safe dosage level.
- Other professionals that have been granted prescription privileges, such as nurse practitioners, dentists, and physician's assistants, all have medical training.
- Research has shown that there is a consistent lack of evidence about the safety of granting prescription privileges to psychologists.¹
- Giving psychologists the right to prescribe medication will not alleviate the shortage of mental health providers in underserved areas, as psychologists are generally located in the same geographic areas as physicians and psychiatrists.²
- Programs that train psychologists to prescribe medication are not cost-effective. For example, a Department of Defense program, terminated in 1996, cost more than $6 million to train 10 psychologists to prescribe – roughly $610,000 per psychologist.³
- Only two states, New Mexico and Louisiana, allow psychologists to prescribe medication. All other states and the District of Columbia restrict psychologists from prescription privileges.
- Neither New Mexico nor Louisiana has conducted formal studies to assess the impact of allowing psychologists to prescribe medication on access to or quality of mental health care.

Take Action

We urge you to reject legislation that would grant prescriptive authority to psychologists, as this risks patient care and will not address the greater public health issue of access to quality mental health care.

To improve access to effective mental health services in underserved areas, policymakers can:

- Provide consultative reimbursement between child and adolescent psychiatrists and primary care physicians.
- Increase the child and adolescent psychiatric workforce:
  - Provide incentives for medical students to go into child and adolescent psychiatry;
  - Provide funding to child psychiatry training programs to fund additional residents;
  - Provide funding for the creation of post-pediatric training programs.
- Increase funding for the overall mental health system.
2Ibid.