

PROTECTING OUR HEALTHCARE WORKERS

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THE ISSUE

While unfortunately not a unique story, Dr. Lorna Breen's tragic death in April 2020 to suicide while working as an EM physician in Manhattan during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic has served to spur many to action. Since her passing, the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes Foundation has been hard at work combatting the epidemics of burnout, suicide, and mental illness in our healthcare professional community (1). This has become increasingly important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as healthcare providers are stretched to their limits as they are asked to perform above and beyond their credentials.

Even before the pandemic, it had been shown that nearly half of physicians experience burnout – about twice the prevalence of the general working population in the US – and about 10% experience suicidal ideation (2). There are many hypothesized causes of these high rates, including a loss of autonomy and feelings of powerlessness (3). No matter the source, it is paramount that we address this crisis head-on to protect our workforce for the future. And it isn't just healthcare providers that face the fallout – it has been shown that burnout and mental illness in healthcare results in lower quality of care, lower patient satisfaction, higher medical errors, and higher staff turnover (4).

STEPS TOWARDS ENSURING MENTAL HEALTH ACCESS FOR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS

The process of fighting for mental health access for current and future healthcare professionals must be multifaceted, involving healthcare institutions, training programs, lawmakers, trainees, students, professionals, and larger society. Regulatory agencies and residency programs must refrain from asking questions about clinicians' mental health treatment (5). Training programs and healthcare institutions must engage in education, programming, and policy development that centers well-being and mental health support for all providers (5).

Lawmakers and elected officials can support these efforts by providing resources and funding for programs that center mental health treatment and wellness initiatives. This is exactly what the **Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act** will do. But this conversation must be ongoing - lawmakers should be educated about the mental health crisis amongst healthcare providers, and encouraged to partner with organizations that represent them.

More than anything, we must all engage daily in de-stigmatizing mental health support and treatment for all in our society (6).

THE BILLS:

H.R.1667/S.610

H.R. 1667:

- Introduced by Rep. Susan Wild (D-PA-07), Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-IL-08), Judy Chu (D-CA-27), and David McKinley (R-WV-01)
- **Awaiting referral from the House Energy and Commerce Committee**

S. 610:

- Introduced by Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA), Todd Young (R-IN), Jack Reed (D-RI), and Bill Cassidy, M.D. (R-LA)
- **Passed August 6, 2021**

Purpose:

To promote mental/behavioral health among those working on the frontlines of the pandemic, and to prevent suicide/burnout among health care professionals.

Specifically, the Bill seeks to:

- Establish grants for training health profession students and professionals in evidence-informed strategies to reduce and prevent suicide, burnout, mental health conditions, and substance use disorders.
- Identify and disseminate evidence-informed best practices for reducing and preventing suicide and burnout among health care professionals
- Establish campaigns and studies on this topic

REFERENCES

