

Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: COVID-19 Can Worsen the Opioid Epidemic

Before coronavirus, policymakers were focused on eliminating the opioid epidemic. A recent article in The Washington Post says it's probably only going to get worse because treatment centers are being denied extra emergency funds allocated by Congress due to a technicality.

Treatment Centers or Behavioral Health Centers serve nearly half a million people in the United States are certified to provide medication-assisted treatment for opioid abuse that's approved by the Food and Drug Administration. This approach to addiction has been shown to be highly effective and has gained more acceptance across the country as states and localities sought over the past few years to lessen addiction's toll on their communities. Health care providers are now concerned about their financial status in the COVID environment that has primed increased struggles with addiction. The centers are anticipating a crushing wave of new demand amid the public health and economic crisis, even as they grapple with how to provide remote care.

According to The Post, opioid treatment providers weren't eligible to share in the \$50 billion for Medicare providers from the Cares Act that lawmakers approved in March. They are indeed Medicare providers: As of January, they were able to participate in the program. Congress made that change as part of the opioid response bill it passed in 2018. But the Cares Act payments are based on 2019 Medicare payments. And opioid treatment providers didn't get any Medicare payments that year, because they weren't yet eligible. Medicaid is the country's biggest payer of addiction and mental-health services and covers four in 10 people with opioid addiction.

Executives for these centers feel like they've been demoted from higher-priority health providers to more of an afterthought. The coronavirus pandemic has killed nearly 80,000 people in the United States. Before the virus struck, politicians and policymakers were wringing their hands over how to stem an opioid abuse crisis that has killed more than 400,000 people in the United States since 2000.

Experts maintain that now is the precise moment to be supporting these kinds of programs that help people recover and predict the coronavirus crisis will lead more Americans to suffer from mental illness and abuse drugs and alcohol. Some of the factors include increased isolation, stress and fear stemming from the pandemic. An estimated 75,000 Americans could die from drug or alcohol misuse, or suicide, as a result of the pandemic. Heightened anxiety is a near-universal trigger for drug use, and it is difficult to think of a more stressful event for all of us than COVID. Opioid use disorder is fundamentally a disease characterized by isolation and hopelessness. The Post maintains there is evidence that epidemic is being exacerbated by this pandemic, so we need to make sure as a country we are continuing to provide recovery services to folks who need it to prevent a fourth wave of the opioid epidemic.

Congress hasn't left substance abuse providers entirely out of its pandemic response bills, but the funding has been relatively meager. The Cares Act provided \$425 million for states to address mental illness and substance abuse, to be awarded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration at the Department of Health and Human Services. Compare that to the \$175 billion emergency fund Congress has set up for hospitals and other providers. Much of that funding has gone to hospitals directly caring for covid-19 patients. But other providers not on the front lines such as orthopedic practices also received dollars to help make up lost revenue when they were forced to suspend nonessential services for weeks on end.

Substance abuse providers stress that they've also suffered financial losses. Six in 10 community behavioral health organizations believe they can survive financially no longer than three months amid the pandemic, according to a survey released last month. The council and the American Society of Addiction Medicine asked congress for \$38.5 billion in emergency funds for behavioral health organizations to avert a large-scale public health issue. They want much of the funding awarded through the Medicaid program, considering the outsize role it plays in paying for treatment for people who abuse opioids.

The Washington Post is a major American daily newspaper published in Washington, D.C. It has taken a leadership role in following the Nations opioid epidemic. Please visit The Post's Opioid Files for more information at www.washingtonpost.com.

The SAFE Glen Cove Coalition is conducting an opioid prevention awareness campaign entitled. "Keeping Glen Cove SAFE," in order to educate and update the community regarding opioid use and its consequences. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE's website to learn more about the Opioid Epidemic at www.safeglencove.org.