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For Immediate Release

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Don't be Fooled by the Name: "Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2013" is Harmful, Not Helpful

Madison, WI, April 3, 2014 – On December 12, 2013, Rep. Tim Murphy (R-Pa.) introduced HR 3717, the "Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2013." Wisconsin Family Ties is troubled by the provisions and overall tenor of this bill. Unfortunately, HR 3717 has gained 61 cosponsors in the House of Representatives, and a hearing on the bill will be held today at 10:30 am in the Subcommittee on Health (<https://energycommerce.house.gov/hearing/helping-families-mental-health-crisis-act-2013>).

Turns back the clock on mental health progress

HR 3717 would turn back the clock on three decades' worth of advances in mental health services and supports. It would diminish such concepts as self-determination and consumer- and family-driven care in favor of a narrowly-defined medical model. "Despite the fact that the medical model all too often has failed individuals with mental illnesses, the family-driven movement is not an anti-treatment movement," said Hugh Davis, executive director at Wisconsin Family Ties. "Quite the contrary, each and every day, family-run organizations help parents access appropriate treatment for their children."

Regrettably, HR 3717 would have a devastating effect on the funding for family-run organizations such as Wisconsin Family Ties. Instead of helping families in crisis, the bill would leave many families to face mental health crises alone, without the support of peer-run programs that are currently available. "Taking away the parent peer support that helps families navigate complex systems to ensure that their children are receiving needed treatment and supports, that assists families and schools to develop successful educational plans, and that helps keep kids at home where they belong, will harm families rather than help them," added Davis.

Dismissive of the role of parents and youth

Despite the words "Helping Families" in the bill's title, the 135-page document does not once mention any youth or family involvement in mental health planning, review or evaluation activities. In fact, HR 3717 would explicitly diminish the role of family members in state mental health planning and advisory councils.

While Wisconsin Family Ties is very much in favor of increased mental health research, this bill would limit the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) programmatic funding to diagnostic and treatment services within a narrowly-defined set of evidence based practice. The bill skews decision-making authority regarding what constitutes evidence based practice toward the medical community, with no input from those who utilize such services and can provide valuable insight into what really works.

In addition, HR 3717 would eliminate grant funding at SAMHSA intended for consumer- and family-run organizations. These grant programs, including the Statewide Family Network program run by Wisconsin Family Ties, provide peer-delivered services and supports that improve outcomes and quality of life for children and adults who have mental health disorders. These organizations are key to

promoting recovery and community inclusion for individuals with mental health challenges. Eliminating these programs would lead to increased hospitalization, which is far more expensive and produces poorer outcomes than effective community-based services.

Wisconsin Family Ties has been successful at keeping kids at home and in school. In just the past year, we have:

- reversed school suspensions and expulsions and worked with educators to successfully reintegrate students into their schools
- reunited families separated by out-of-home placements of their children
- helped families navigate complex service systems and connect with needed services / providers
- found housing for homeless families and helped them furnish their new homes
- supported families through child protective services investigations and various court proceedings
- collaborated with the Department of Corrections to implement trauma-informed care at the state's juvenile corrections facilities and pilot the use of parent peer support with families of incarcerated youth

“In our most recent evaluation survey, 97% of families reported having more information regarding their child’s diagnosis, treatment options and available community-based programs and providers after receiving services from Wisconsin Family Ties,” stated Deb Ramacher, associate director at Wisconsin Family Ties. “The peer support services we provide are effective, supported by research, and deliver benefits for families that cannot be derived from any other source.”

Perpetuates Stigma

Ironically, while the bill contains a section on “reducing the stigma of serious mental illness,” the document is laden with stigmatizing concepts and language. An additional egregious perpetuation of stigma was the apparent timing of the introduction of HR 3717 to coincide with the December anniversary of the Sandy Hook tragedy. Rep. Murphy’s introductory remarks intentionally and irresponsibly connected mental illness and violence, an approach that reinforces incorrect stereotypes and results in greater reluctance to seek mental health treatment.

In fact, statistics show that people with mental health needs are far more likely to be the victims of violence than they are to be the perpetrators. Research studies show that the major determinants of violence continue to be other demographic and socio-economic factors, not mental illness.

Dismantles protections for children and adults who have mental health disorders

HR 3717 cuts funding to the Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness (PAIMI) program by 85% and limits the types of assistance that can be provided by the program. The PAIMI program was created after an exhaustive Congressional investigation shed light on rampant abuse and neglect in our nation’s psychiatric institutions. As a result, Congress decided that individuals with mental illness needed independent advocates in every state and territory to stop abuse and neglect, and to ensure that needed services and supports were being provided. In Wisconsin, the need for such advocacy is acute and unrelenting, as evidenced by recently-published reports of deaths of patients at public mental health facilities in the state.

The bill not only reduces funding for personal advocates, it also takes away certain privacy rights while limiting an individual’s ability to make his or her own decisions about treatment.

Questionable spending priorities

While the bill does reauthorize some important programs for children with mental health needs and their families, it appears there is no increase in funding proposed for such programs. Rather than investing in needed services for children, families and adults, HR 3717 proposes to increase the size of government by

creating a new, byzantine bureaucracy which is, in most cases, duplicative of the responsibilities currently performed by SAMHSA officials.

The proposed bill would create new high-level positions, panels, committees and a policy “laboratory.” All grants would have to be reviewed by Congressional committees prior to award. In parallel, it removes much of the authority currently accorded to SAMHSA, but leaves the administration in place.

Urgent need for dialogue

Wisconsin Family Ties is strongly in favor of increased access to mental health information, treatment, services and supports. However, while we believe HR3717 represents good intent gone awry, the changes proffered by the bill would serve to make the nation’s mental health system weaker, not stronger.

The deep flaws of HR 3717 underscore the continued, urgent need for ongoing dialogue with those who experience mental illness, their families and their communities. Such collaboration is crucial in fostering the creation of systems, services and supports that promote the health, welfare and safety of all.

Wisconsin Family Ties encourages our Congressional leaders to begin engaging youth with mental health needs and their families to better understand what works for them. By doing so, Congress will be better equipped to create legislation that will improve mental health outcomes while respecting the dignity of those who experience mental illness and their families.

About Wisconsin Family Ties

Wisconsin Family Ties, Wisconsin’s family voice for children’s mental health, is a parent-run nonprofit serving families that include children with social, emotional or behavioral challenges. Founded in 1987, its mission is to enhance lives by promoting children’s mental health.

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