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## **Excellence in Mental Health Act will increase access for everyone**

*by Chuck Ingoglia, opinion contributor - 01/07/26 1:00 PM ET*

Across the country, our behavioral health system is straining under a severe workforce shortage, leaving millions of people without access to comprehensive mental health and substance use care. Too many individuals and families are left waiting — or going without support entirely — at a time when needs are rising.

Amid these challenges, a group of senators is demonstrating real leadership by advancing policies that would strengthen our nation's behavioral health infrastructure. One of the most impactful solutions they are championing is the expansion of Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics.

These clinics are transforming mental health and substance use treatment in hundreds of communities across the country by providing comprehensive, 24/7 access to care — including crisis services — regardless of ability to pay.

They coordinate care, strengthen the behavioral health workforce and ease the massive pressures on emergency departments and law enforcement, which have become de facto responders to mental health and overdose emergencies.

A bipartisan coalition of senators has presented a solution to enable more people to access the comprehensive care offered by these game-changing clinics.

The Ensuring Excellence in Mental Health Act, introduced by Sens. John Cornyn (R-Texas), Tina Smith (D-Minn.), Thom Tillis (R-N.C.) and Catherine Cortez Masto (D-Nev.), would take a major step toward ensuring that even more communities can benefit right now from this successful model of care. The legislation advances several core priorities:

- Better access for older adults: By establishing Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics as a provider type under Medicare, the bill makes it easier for older adults to access comprehensive behavioral health services, while improving workforce sustainability.
- Deeper care integration: The act would give these clinics the option to provide additional primary care services, which would help them deliver whole-person care.
- Continued expansion and sustainable support: The act will help states expand services, grow workforce capacity and ensure technical assistance is available to help clinics not just succeed, but thrive.

- We know they work — not in theory, but in practice. More than 500 Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics across 48 states and territories serve an estimated 3 million children, adults and families. The data from these clinics shows these clinics are dramatically improving access to care.
- Timely connection: More than 80 percent of these clinics see clients for routine needs within 10 days of the initial call, a stark contrast to the national average of 48 days.
- Increased services: Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics have seen a 33 percent increase in the number of people served. And 60 percent report an increase in the number of individuals engaged in medication-assisted treatment, a critical tool for treating disorders including opioid use disorder.
- Reaching more people: Over 80 percent of these clinics have expanded programs to reach veterans and people experiencing homelessness.
- Stronger workforce, more jobs: Through stable funding, Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics have reported increased hiring, adding a median of 22 new positions per clinic. This means more people can be seen, and it spurs job growth in the community.

They also offer resources and care to treat the whole person. For example, the Healthy for Life program at LifeWays, in Michigan, empowers people through nutrition education, personal fitness coaching and healthy-eating classes. LifeWays, and clinics like it, also helps reduce homelessness and ease the instability that so often fuels mental health crises. These clinics are innovative, community-rooted, and successful in reaching people long left behind by the traditional system.

Through standardized data reporting, annual cost reports providing a detailed view of clinics' expenditures and regular community needs assessments, the model provides a level of transparency that supports performance and financial monitoring along with quality improvement — allowing the public to see exactly how these clinics deliver results.

And they truly do deliver. Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics decrease emergency room visits by 55 percent, reduce mental health care hospitalizations by 55 percent, and have even lowered incidents of homelessness measured in the previous 30 days by 31 percent.

We thank Congress for prioritizing improving access to mental health and substance use care. This is an important bill that will help sustain access to comprehensive care for the nearly 4 million already served by them and help to give millions more people a real path to wellbeing. If you or someone you know may be considering suicide, contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988 or chat 988lifeline.org.