

NEWS RELEASE



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Over 100 Organizations Support the Introduction of the Tonko/Fitzpatrick Bi-Partisan “Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act”

The International Transformational Resilience Coalition (ITRC)* and over 100 other national, regional, state, and local mental health, human services, education, faith, and other organizations strongly endorsed the bi-partisan “Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act” (CMWRA) introduced by Representatives Paul Tonko (D-NY) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA).

The legislation has garnered support from Representative Kathy Castor (D-FL), who is an original cosponsor, as well as national organizations such as the: *American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, National Alliance on Mental Health, National Association of Social Workers, American Public Health Association, Mental Health America, National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, Children’s Environmental Health Network, the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, National Council for Mental Wellbeing, Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments, American Lung Association; Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice, EcoAmerica, American Association on Health and Disability, The Kennedy Forum, Health Care Without Harm, and many others.*

Many regional organizations such as *United Way of the Columbia Willamette* in Oregon, state groups like the *New York State Association of County Health Officials (NYSACHO)*, and numerous local organizations such as *Resilient Communities Utah, the Community Resilience Initiative in Walla Walla WA, and Neighborhood Resilience Project in Pittsburg PA* also endorsed the legislation. [Click here for a complete list of the organizations that endorse the CMWRA](#)

Comment from Congressman Paul Tonko:

“In 2021 alone, more than 1 in 5 American adults experienced a diagnosed mental illness,” Congressman Tonko said. “And with more than 40 percent of Americans living in a county impacted by a major natural disaster last year, it is increasingly clear that worsening severe weather patterns are contributing to this crisis. Natural disasters bring significant upheaval and real trauma to our communities, and it is time for Congress to take action to empower those communities to respond to this growing challenge. I’m proud to lead the way on this resilience building legislation that will help address our nation’s mental health crisis through grants and partnerships with local, community-based initiatives. I’ll continue to work to deliver science-based, evidence-informed solutions that benefit communities across our region and our nation.”

Comment from Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick:

"In 2021, more than forty percent of Americans lived in a county that was impacted by a natural disaster," said Congressman Fitzpatrick. "As a result, the number of individuals who experienced a mental health problem often outweighed those with physical injuries. That is why I am proud to introduce this bipartisan legislation alongside my colleague, Representative Tonko, to expand our nation's mental health care services on a local level."

Comment from Bob Doppelt, Coordinator of the International Transformational Resilience Coalition (ITRC).

"The Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act is an urgently needed new policy," said Bob Doppelt, Coordinator of the International Transformational Resilience Coalition (ITRC). "We sincerely thank Representatives Tonko and Fitzpatrick for seeing the need and taking the initiative to begin to expand the way our nation addresses mental health and psychosocial problems by introducing legislation that will support community-based initiatives that use a public health approach to build the capacity of all residents for mental wellness and resilience all types of adversities."

Comments from Other US Mental Health and Human Services Leaders

"The American Psychiatric Association strongly supports the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act and commends Representatives Tonko and Fitzpatrick for their leadership in introducing it. This forward-thinking proposal would authorize grants focused on strategies to enhance the ability of communities to confront the mental health impacts of acute and long-term disruptions from natural disasters, as well as other public health impacts of climate change. APA strongly supports this effort to foster resilience and mental wellness in communities across the nation," said APA CEO and Medical Director Saul Levin, M.D., M.P.A.

"The National Association of Social Workers sends our sincerest thanks to Representatives Tonko and Fitzpatrick for introducing the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act," said Angelo McClain, PhD, LICSW, Chief Executive Officer, NASW. "Social workers are on the front line helping individuals and families that experience the accelerating stresses and traumas generated by climate change and other adversities. We know that building robust social connections and forming mutual support networks in neighborhoods and communities are key to preventing and healing the mental health problems that can result from these difficulties. For this reason the NASW strongly supports this legislation because it will fund community-based efforts to build psychological and emotional resilience."

"Mental health impacts need to be considered and amplified when having discussions regarding losses and damages associated with climate change," said Katie Huffling, Executive Director, Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments. "Nurses understand the importance of the proactive and holistic approach that is the foundation of the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act. The rapidly worsening climate crisis requires multidisciplinary solutions along with input from and consideration for communities most impacted- the elderly, low income communities, individuals with comorbidities."

"While there is increasing focus on building more resilient physical infrastructure, we've not paid nearly enough attention to the psychological consequences of the rising natural disasters and other adversities we face," said Dr. David Shern, Senior Associate, Department of Mental Health Bloomberg School of Public Health, Senior Public Health Advisor at National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, and former President/CEO of Mental Health America. "It is critical that these population health issues be addressed systematically and quickly. Fortunately, we have tools to address this challenge, but need policies to implement them. The Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act is one of the essential policies."

"The Community Mental Wellness and Resiliency Act is essential to create the infrastructure throughout the United States needed to prepare our citizens for the array of mental health challenges that follow climate events," said Elaine Miller-Karas, Co-Founder and Director of Innovation at the Trauma Resource Institute. "Our organization works in the U.S. and we have seen a systemic lack of preparedness to respond to the mental health challenges people face before, during, and after these devastating events. This policy is urgently needed to support coordinated community-based initiatives and should be embraced as a national priority."

"How do we build strong, resilient communities?" asks Becky Turner, Director of Community Engagement for the Community Resilience Initiative in Walla Walla, WA. "We follow the science, and we put our focus on weaving trauma-informed and resilience-based practices into the very fabric of our community. Data confirms that the use of resilience-based practices can help communities overcome adversity and related health outcomes. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, we have renewed urgency to pass the 'Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act,' to ensure all communities have access to this life-saving and revelatory framework."

"America's current approach to disasters is too reactionary, providing support after a traumatic event," said Jesse Kohler, Executive Director of the Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice (CTIPP). "This legislation will build community partnerships to help them prepare for disasters. Strong communities heal faster and reduce the mental health consequences that can ripple through the community. We thank Representatives Tonko and Fitzpatrick for their leadership."

ITRC Coordinator Bob Doppelt concluded by stating "Given the remarkable number of national, regional, state, and local organizations that endorsed the CMWRA, it is evident that people nationwide see the need to expand the way we address mental health issues to emphasize community-based initiatives that use a public health population-level approach to prevent and heal mental health and psychosocial problems."

* The International Transformational Resilience Coalition (ITRC) is a network of mental health, social services, disaster management, faith, environmental, social justice, education and other professions working to establish methods to prevent and heal the mental health and psychosocial problems generated by the climate emergency and other adversities. Website: <http://www.theresourceinnovationgroup.org/>

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Overview of the “Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act”

[Click here to read the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act](#)

This urgently needed new policy will, for the first time, authorize the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to fund and support community-based initiatives nationwide that use a public health approach to enhance their entire population's capacity for mental wellness and resilience to prevent and heal climate change-generated and other mental health and psychosocial problems.

This is needed because mental health problems are at epidemic levels today. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic mental health problems were rising nationwide. According to Mental Health America, last year almost 20 percent of adults, or nearly 50 million Americans, experienced a diagnosed mental illness and 5 percent had a severe mental illness. About 8 percent had a substance use disorder, 10 percent experienced an alcohol disorder, and over 11 million adults reported serious thoughts of suicide.¹ In addition, a 2022 CDC survey found that overall, 37 percent of students at public and private high schools reported poor mental health, including stress, anxiety, and depression.² A poll by the American Psychiatric Association last year found that 53 percent of adults with children under 18 said they are concerned about the mental state of their children.³

The historic storms, floods, wildfires, heatwaves, droughts, and other disasters generated by the accelerating climate emergency are aggravating these problems and creating new ones. In 2021 more than 40 percent of Americans lived in a county that was impacted by a major natural disaster. Disasters can traumatize 20-40 percent of those who are directly impacted, 10-20 percent of disaster response workers, and 5-10 percent of the general population who are not directly affected but know someone who is or view the events from afar.⁴ Consequently, the number of people who experience a mental health problem as a result of a disaster often outweigh those with physical injuries by 40 to 1.⁵

Community traumas are also increasing. This means an overwhelmingly stressful event or series of events, such as wildfires, floods, or mass shootings that traumatize most people residing in a specific neighborhood, town, or city.

Our mental health, human services, and disaster mental health systems cannot assist all of the people who experience mental health problems today, and this gap will only grow over time. In addition, many people will not engage in treatment due to high costs, fears of being stigmatized, injustices embedded in the mental health system, and other reasons.

To reduce today's epidemic of mental health problems, and prevent future ones, the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act will:

- Authorize CDC to establish a grant program to expand existing community-based initiatives and form new ones that use a public health approach to enhance population-level capacity to prevent and heal mental health problems generated by persistent disasters and toxic stresses.⁶

- Appropriate \$30,000,000 for fiscal years 2023 through 2027 to fund small planning grants of up to \$15,000 to help community initiatives get organized, and larger program grants of up to \$4 million to support and help expand existing community wellness and resilience initiatives.
- The community-based initiatives funded by this program will involve a wide and diverse network of grass-roots and neighborhood leaders, and non-profit, private, and public organizations.
- The community initiatives will develop their own age and culturally appropriate strategies to engage all adults and youth in enhancing and sustaining mental wellness and resilience, with high-risk individuals and those with symptoms of pathology given special attention as part of the larger community effort.
- The strategies will use evidence-based, evidence-informed, promising, and/or indigenous practices to engage residents in strengthening existing protective factors, and forming additional ones, to help all adults and youth push back against traumatic stressors, maintain mental wellness, and rapidly recover when they are impacted by toxic stresses or disasters.
- Individualized mental health treatment will support the community-based wellness and resilience building activities and assist people who still cannot function, or are at risk of harming themselves or others.

In sum, the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act provides a much needed expansion of our nation's approach to preventing and healing mental health problems by supporting community-based initiatives.

¹ <https://www.mhanational.org/issues/2022/mental-health-america-adult-data>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/abes.htm>

³ <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/new-apa-poll-shows-sustained-anxiety-among-americans-more-than-half-of-parents-are-concerned-about-the-mental-well-being-of-their-children>

⁴ Goldman E. and Galea Sandro. (March 2014). Mental Health Consequences of Disasters. *Annual Review of Public Health*. Obtained at:

<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-032013-182435>

⁵ <https://www.climatecentral.org/climate-matters/climate-change-and-mental-health>

⁶ <https://www.bu.edu/sph/news/articles/2019/public-health-means-mental-health/>