



January 22, 2015

The Honorable Marilyn B. Tavenner, Administrator  
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Ave, SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Administrator Tavenner:

Mental Health America (MHA) and our network of more than 200 affiliates nationwide would like to thank the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Obama Administration for the December 2014 guidance on the Medicaid “free care” policy. **We applaud this action and commend you for it. It represents a significant advance in identifying and supporting children with mental health needs before crises occur.**

We especially appreciate the many ways this change is aligned with and advances MHA’s priorities: prevention for all; early identification and intervention for those at risk; integrated health and behavioral health (and other) services for those who need them; and recovery as a goal.

**The “free care” policy change will encourage schools to implement and fund ubiquitous mental health screenings.** We know that when a child is assessed early, we can change the trajectories of their lives. Earlier identification and intervention will result in improved, coordinated care and reduce suspension, expulsion, or withdrawal prior to graduation. Our hope is that mental health assessments will soon be as common as vision, hearing, and dental assessments.

The new guidance in the “free care” policy is a step in the right direction. In the near future, **we hope that this guidance and additional reforms will support integration of mental health, general health, and school based services.** Connecting the services a child receives both inside and outside the school setting will help increase effectiveness and efficiency while promoting the best care for children and their families. Through integration, health care providers will become more attuned to supporting children outside of health care settings and schools will make use of non-school-based resources to support the learning – and improve the success – of children in their schools. These are important points of policy advocacy for us.

Together, these changes will support the growth and implementation of important broad-based early intervention services. Removing barriers and increasing collaboration will encourage early and prompt interventions that will lead to a quicker recovery and protection for all children.

Again, we thank you for your efforts and look forward to the day that integrated health, behavioral health, educational, social, and other services – with an eye toward recovery – are truly a reality.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Gionfriddo".

Paul Gionfriddo  
President and CEO  
Mental Health America

c. President Barack Obama