

March 9, 2021

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The Honorable Richard Pan
California State Senate
State Capitol, Room 5114
Sacramento, CA 95814

**SB 221 (Wiener) Health care coverage: timely access to care
– SUPPORT**

Dear Senator Pan:

On behalf of the National Alliance on Mental Illness - California (NAMI-CA), I am writing to request your support for SB 221, which will close a loophole in state law and regulations and establish a clear and appropriate timely access standard for follow-up appointments for mental health care and substance use disorder (MH/SUD) treatment.

NAMI-CA is the statewide affiliate of the country's largest mental health advocacy organization, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Our over 110,000 active advocates and 62 affiliates include many people living with serious mental illnesses, their families, and supporters. NAMI-CA advocates on their behalf, providing education and support to its members and the broader community.

Current law and regulations have been interpreted to require HMOs under the jurisdiction of the Department of Managed Health Care (DHMC) and health insurers under the jurisdiction of the California Department of Insurance (CDI) to offer enrollees initial appointments with non-physician mental health and substance use disorder (MH/SUD) providers within ten business days, but not to establish similar standards for offering needed follow-up care from these providers.

Compassionate and effective mental health and substance use disorder treatment relies on ongoing and consistent courses of treatment. However, it is common for patients to wait more than 4 weeks for a follow-up appointment for clinically appropriate treatment. Delays in accessing appropriate treatment can lead to:

- Longer recovery times
- Worsening outcomes
- Increased morbidity and mortality rates
- Increased time away from work
- Increased strain on families
- Increased risk of decompensation
- Accelerating crises requiring more costly and intensive care

In the past year, the Covid-19 pandemic has upended our daily lives and increased the incidence of anxiety and depression in our communities. Moreover, during the pandemic even more than before, California's challenges in addressing problems of



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homelessness and housing, education and criminal justice are being exacerbated by the lack of timely follow-up treatment for MH/SUD patients who desperately need it. Expanding timely access to MH/SUD services over the full course of treatment that patients require for healing must be one of California's highest priorities.

SB 221 is consistent with and complementary to last year's groundbreaking mental health parity legislation, SB 855, and will ensure California's continued national leadership on these issues. I thank you for your leadership and, again, strongly support SB 221.

For these reasons, NAMI-CA is pleased to support SB 221. I may be reached at jessica@namica.org or (916) 567-0163 with any questions you may have. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jessica Cruz, MPA/HS
Chief Executive Officer