

## NEWS RELEASE



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## **135 Organizations Praise Introduction of Landmark Bi-Partisan “Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023”**

### **See Quotes Below from Congressional Co-Leads and National Mental Health and Human Service Organizational and Community Leaders**

The International Transformational Resilience Coalition (ITRC)\* and 134 other national, regional, state, and local organizations strongly endorsed the landmark bi-partisan “Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023” (CMWRA) introduced in the House by co-sponsors Representatives Paul Tonko (D-NY), Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), Don Bacon (R-NE), Mary Peltola (D-AK) and Kathy Castor (D-FL), and by Senators Ed Markey (D-MA), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Richard Blumenthal (CT), and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) in the Senate.

The CMWRA will, for the first time, direct the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to fund and support community initiatives nationwide that use a public health approach to strengthen the capacity for mental wellness and resilience of all residents for all types of toxic stresses, extreme weather events, emergencies, and disasters. [Click here to see a summary and text of the legislation.](#)

The CMWRA is endorsed by national organizations such as the: *National Association of State Mental Health Program Director; American Psychiatric Association; American Psychological Association; Mental Health America; National Association of Social Workers; American Public Health Association; National Rural Health Association; Children’s Environmental Health Network; the Anxiety and Depression Association of America; Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments; American Association on Health and Disability;* and many others. Dozens of regional, state, and local organizations have also endorsed the legislation. [Click here to see the list of the 130 organizational endorsers.](#)

### **Comment from Co-Lead Congressman Paul Tonko (D-NY):**

“The increasing number and severity of natural disasters and toxic stresses cost our communities dearly, taking lives and livelihoods—and the trauma felt from these disasters runs even further,” Rep. Tonko said. “Studies show that these impactful events can traumatize upwards of 40 percent of those who live in the affected area. That’s why I’m partnering with my colleagues 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 nation and offer a holistic response to the climate crisis.”

### **Comment from Co-Lead Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA)**

“In 2022, more than 3 million Americans were impacted by a natural disaster,” said Congressman Fitzpatrick. “I am proud to introduce this bipartisan legislation that expands our nation’s mental health resources at the local level with community-based initiatives, ensuring that victims of natural disasters have access to critical mental health care.”

### **Comment from Senator Ed Markey (D-MA)**

“Environmental justice communities are bearing the brunt of compounded climate and mental health crises fueled by climate disasters that level homes, break apart communities, and leave people with visible and invisible scars,” said **Senator Markey**. “The Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act is central to our vision for a Green New Deal future that addresses not only the health of our planet but the health of our people. This legislation will give communities the resources they need to build defenses to these dual crises and ensure a healthier, more sustainable future for all.”

### **Comment from Bob Doppelt, Coordinator of the International Transformational Resilience Coalition**

"Prevention and healing through community-based initiatives is the cure to our nation’s current epidemic of mental health problems and to preventing future epidemics,” said ITRC Coordinator Bob Doppelt. "We sincerely thank the House co-leads Representatives Tonko and Fitzpatrick and co-sponsors Reps. Bacon, Peltola, and Castor, as well as Senators Markey, Merkley, Blumenthal, and Whitehouse for introducing the landmark Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023. It will, for the first time, fund and support community initiatives that use a public health approach to strengthen the capacity of all residents for mental wellness and resilience for all types of toxic stresses, disasters, and emergencies.”

### **Comments from Mental Health, Social Service, and Community Leaders From Across the Nation:**

“The American Public Health Association strongly supports the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023,” said **APHA Executive Director Dr. Georges C. Benjamin**. "The widespread mental health issues we see today due to extreme weather events, other disasters and a multitude of rising stresses are a major concern. Solutions require the use of a public health approach to mental wellness and resilience in communities. APHA endorses this legislation because it will fund and support communities that use this approach."

“Social workers are on the front-line assisting individuals and families that experience the accelerating distresses generated by extreme weather events and their many consequences, said **Anthony Estreet, Chief Executive Officer, National Association of Social Workers**. “We know from first-hand experience that forming mutual support networks in neighborhoods and communities is vital to preventing and healing the personal, family, and social problems that can result from these adversities. NASW strongly supports the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023 because it will fund community efforts to build population mental wellness and resilience.”

“The American Psychiatric Association strongly supports the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023,” said **APA CEO and Medical Director Saul Levin, M.D., M.P.A.** "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 legislation to foster resilience and mental wellness in communities across the nation.”

“Over 40 counties/communities in North Carolina have multi-sector coalitions that are working to address the stress load of residents from various realms of “ACEs”—including Adverse Childhood, Adverse Community, Adverse Climate, and Atrocious Cultural Events,” said **Mebane Boyd, Resilience Community Officer, North Carolina Partnership for Children**. “Funding provided by the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023 could help sustain these grassroots organizations and the valuable work they are doing to educate, respond, and work on mental health prevention.”

“The mental health impacts of climate change must be considered in discussions on how to address this public health crisis, said **Katie Huffling, Executive Director, Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments**. “Unfortunately, our current health system is not prepared to adequately care for those burdened by climate change. Nurses understand the importance of the proactive and holistic approach that is the foundation of the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023. The rapidly worsening climate crisis requires multidisciplinary solutions along with input from and consideration for communities most impacted. Passage of the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023 is a much needed step towards building resilience and promoting mental wellness in the wake of the growing climate crisis. Members of the Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments will continue to call on elected officials to pass this necessary legislation.”

"We need to give equal attention to preventing and healing the psychological consequences of the increasingly frequent and intense natural disasters as we do on building more resilient physical infrastructure," 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 and investments to implement them. The Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023 is essential in meeting these challenges.

“The Community Mental Wellness and Resiliency Act of 2023 is essential to create the social infrastructure throughout the United States needed to prepare our citizens for the array of mental health challenges resulting from toxic stresses and acute climate events,” said **Elaine Miller-Karas, Co-Founder and Director of Innovation at the Trauma Resource Institute**. “Our organization works across 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 traumatic stressors. This policy is urgently needed to support coordinated community-based initiatives and should be embraced as a national priority.”

"We know how to build strong resilient communities," said **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 of 2023" to ensure all communities have access to this life-saving and revelatory framework."

"America's current approach to persistent stresses and disasters is too reactionary, focused on providing support only after a traumatic event," said **Jesse Kohler, Executive Director of the Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice (CTIPP)**. "The Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023 will build community partnerships to help residents prepare for and respond in constructive ways to adversities. Resilient communities reduce the mental health consequences that can ripple through the community and help residents heal when traumas do occur. We thank Representatives Tonko and Fitzpatrick and Senator Markey and all of the co-sponsors for their leadership on this important legislation."

**ITRC Coordinator Bob Doppelt concluded** by stating "The fact that 135 national, regional, state, and local organizations endorse the Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023 shows that professionals nationwide see the need to expand the way we address mental health issues to include community-based initiatives that use a public health approach to build population mental wellness and resilience 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, social justice, 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 of 2023”**

[Click here to see a summary of the “Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023” and the complete legislative text](#)

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. <sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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. <sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

Community traumas are also increasing. This means an overwhelmingly stressful event or series of events, such as wildfires, floods, or mass shootings that traumatize the majority of 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 grow over time as more frequent, extreme, and prolonged toxic stresses, emergencies, and disasters occur. In addition, many people will not engage in treatment due to high costs, fears of being stigmatized, and other reasons.

To reduce today's epidemic of mental health problems, and prevent future ones, the “Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023” will:

- Authorize the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to establish a grant program to expand existing community-based initiatives, and form numerous new ones, that use a public

health approach to strengthen population capacity for mental wellness and resilience to prevent and heal mental health problems generated by persistent toxic stresses, emergencies & disasters.<sup>6</sup>

- Provide 'Planning Grants' up to \$250,000 for one year to help communities organize a broad and diverse local 'Resilience Coordinating Network' that will lead community efforts to implement a public health approach to mental wellness and resilience.
- Provide 'Program Grants' of up to \$500,000 per year for up to four years to support the implementation and continual improvement of population-level mental wellness and resilience building strategies by a local 'Resilience Coordinating Network.'
- Set aside 20% of the available funds for rural communities.
- Establish a technical assistance program in CDC to assist communities in applying for a grant and support practitioners involved with Program Grants.
- Appropriate \$36,000,000 for the period of fiscal years 2024 through 2028 for the "Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023".
- The community initiatives will develop their own age and culturally appropriate strategies to use a public health approach to engage all adults and youth in enhancing and sustaining mental wellness and resilience for all types of adversities, with high-risk individuals and those already experiencing symptoms of pathology given special attention as part of the larger population-level 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, emergencies, and disasters.
- Individualized mental health services will remain very important by assisting people who cannot function or are at risk or harming themselves or others, and by in many ways supporting the community-based wellness and resilience building activities.

In sum, the "Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023" provides a much needed expansion of our nation's approach to preventing and healing mental health and psychosocial problems by supporting community-based initiatives.

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

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

<sup>3</sup> <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>

<sup>4</sup> 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>

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

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