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The Honorable Kelly Ayotte
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lynn Jenkins
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Doris Matsui
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senators Ayotte and Blumenthal and Representatives Jenkins and Matsui:

The undersigned national mental health and substance use disorder organizations in the Mental Health Liaison Group are writing today to thank you for your leadership in authoring the Mental Health First Aid Act of 2015 (S. 711). This bill is critical to raising awareness of and increasing public education on mental illness and addiction disorders.

As organizations whose mission is to advocate for improved services for Americans living with mental illness and addictions, we have long recognized the stigma associated with behavioral health disorders. Each year, more than 1 in 5 Americans experiences a mental health or substance use disorder, according to data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Yet, U.S. society remains largely ignorant about the signs and symptoms of mental illness, ignoring our role as supportive community members to help people experiencing these illnesses.

Far too often, this lack of knowledge – along with the stigma attached to seeking help – prevents people who need treatment from accessing the care they need in a timely fashion. While many Americans know how to administer first aid and seek medical help should they come across a person having a heart attack, few are trained to provide similar help to someone experiencing a mental health or substance abuse crisis.

The Mental Health First Aid Act authorizes \$20 million in grants to fund Mental Health First Aid training programs around the country. Participants would be trained in recognizing the symptoms of common mental illnesses and addiction disorders; de-escalating crisis situations safely; and initiating timely referral to mental health and substance abuse resources available in the community. This legislation will provide critical public education that ultimately will help decrease stigma and increase access to care. Along with other important public education programs, such as Crisis Intervention Team programs for first responders (CIT), Mental Health First Aid is a crucial tool in helping Americans identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders.

Every day, we see the effects of our decades-long neglect of Americans' substance abuse and mental healthcare needs. Thank you for your leadership in sparking investments in mental health that will help all Americans live longer, more fulfilling lives.

Sincerely,