**Sound the Alarm for Kids Sample Op-Ed**

We have heard a lot over the last year and a half about how adults are coping with the mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. From the physical separation to the collective sense of loss, it has been a challenging time for all – and that includes our nation’s children and teens. Removed from their school routines, isolated from their friends, and coping with grief, kids have quietly been carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders, and the strain on their mental health has reached a breaking point. The children’s mental health crisis is a national emergency. Congress must take immediate, comprehensive action to reverse this trend and provide our most vulnerable with the mental health resources they desperately need.

Even before COVID-19 hit, there was a documented uptick in the number of children and teens struggling with their mental health, and there are some frightening statistics that illustrate their suffering: Between 2007 and 2018, there was a 60% increase in the rate of suicide among 10- to 24-year-olds, making this the second leading cause of death for this age group. A 2019 study from the National Institute of Mental Health found that almost half of U.S. children and teens ages 13-18 have at least one behavioral, mental, or emotional disorder.

And then, practically overnight, the world turned upside down. While parents and teachers adjusted to the new virtual learning landscape, entire classrooms of students were also forced to recalibrate while managing the very real fears of an invisible enemy. Nearly two years in, we now have a clearer picture of how trying COVID-19 has been for kids. In just the first half of 2021, children’s hospitals reported cases of self-injury and suicide in children ages 5-17 at a 45% higher rate than during the same period in 2019. The Centers for Disease Control found mental-health-related emergency department visits for 5- to 11-year-olds increased 25% from 2019 to 2020. The stress of a child in crisis also extends outward – more than half of adults (53%)with children in their household say they are concerned about the mental state of their children. While we cannot switch off the pandemic, we can take steps to provide families and caregivers with the mental health resources they need to make it through, and thereby nurture positive mental health habits for the long-term.

Children’s hospitals are an important place for Congress to start. Often the first stop for kids on their worst day, children’s hospitals are witnessing the mental health crisis first-hand. [INSERT HOSPITAL ANECDOTES OR PATIENT STORY HERE. EXAMPLES: Earlier this year, Children’s Hospital Colorado declared a state of emergency for youth mental health, stating, “Our pediatric emergency departments and our inpatient units [are] overrun with kids attempting suicide and suffering from other forms of major mental health illness.” Seattle Children's reported seeing one or two patients every night in March 2021 for attempted suicide, with patients waiting up to two weeks for an inpatient bed. And in Milwaukee, Children's Wisconsin experienced an 80% increase in referrals for mental health services in December 2020 compared to December 2019.] Children’s hospitals have a practical understanding of kids’ unique needs that – with the right resources from Congress – could be better harnessed to improve access and care delivery.

It must also be acknowledged that our nation is facing a critical shortage of wraparound services that would keep kids out of the emergency room in the first place. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 15 million children and teens nationwide are in need of care from mental health professionals, but only 8,000 to 9,000 psychiatrists are available to treat them. Further, 43 of 50 states are experiencing a severe shortage in psychiatrists specializing in child and teen care. We need government leaders to prioritize earlier intervention, a secure pipeline of providers, and accessible treatments and services so that the weight of this crisis does not become too heavy to bear.

Children and teens will grow into adults, so when it comes to the kids’ mental health emergency, we do not have the luxury of time. Every kid in America should have the right to live up to their full potential. The kids’ mental health crisis is a national emergency – the clock is ticking for Congress to shore up our mental health infrastructure and provide for the next generation.