

# Federal legislation's message to doctors: It's OK to ask for help

OCT 7, 2020

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**What's the news:** Bipartisan congressional legislation named after a New York City emergency physician who died of suicide during the COVID-19 pandemic will help bolster the mental health infrastructure needed to support doctors and other health professionals who have worked tirelessly to save lives from the deadly respiratory illness caused by SARS-CoV-2.

The bill—S. 4349/H.R. 8094, “The Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act”—is named after the 49-year-old physician whose tragic death made headlines in an early pandemic hot spot already overwhelmed by COVID-19.

Dr. Breen's sister and sister-in-law joined AMA Immediate Past President Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA, during a recent episode of the “AMA COVID-19 Update” to share their loved one's story and discuss legislation designed to normalize asking for help as a physician.

Among other things, S. 4349/H.R. 8094 would establish:

- Grants for training medical students, residents or health professionals in strategies to reduce and prevent suicide, burnout, mental health conditions and substance-use disorders.
- Grants for health professionals to help create and disseminate evidence-based strategies to reduce burnout and the associated secondary mental health conditions related to job stress.
- A national campaign to encourage health professionals to prioritize their mental health and use available mental and behavioral health services.
- Grants for employee education, peer support programming.

The legislation also calls for a comprehensive study on health professional mental health and burnout, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Why it's important:** Compared with the population at large, doctors have a higher risk of suicide, with rates 130% higher among women physicians and almost 50% higher among male doctors.

“The AMA is deeply concerned about the intensifying mental health and burnout crisis among physicians and other health care professionals that has only been exacerbated by COVID-19,” AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD, wrote in supportive letters to U.S. senators and representatives.

“Although physicians have received accolades from their communities, numerous physicians have described feeling lost, alone, and unable to sleep,” Dr. Madara added. “Not only are physicians in constant fear due to the uncertainty of their patients’ health, but there is also considerable anxiety surrounding the potential risks to their own health and the health of their families.”

Dr. Madara noted research showing that 49% of health professionals directly caring for COVID-19 patients in Italy and China are experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms. About 20% of these health professionals reported “symptoms of depression, anxiety and high perceived stress.”

The AMA also has supported similar legislation, introduced earlier in the 116th Congress by Reps. Raja Krishnamoorthi, a Democrat from Illinois, and John Katko, a New York Republican. The “Coronavirus Healthcare Worker Wellness Act” (H.R. 7255) requires the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)—working in conjunction with national professional medical organizations—to award grants to health care employers to either establish or expand programs dedicated to supporting the mental wellness of health care workers on the frontlines of treating COVID-19 patients.

In addition, H.R. 7255 requires the Department of Health and Human Services, also through AHRQ and in collaboration with national professional medical organizations, to complete a comprehensive study on mental health and burnout, with mental health stressors facing COVID-19 front-line physicians a particular area of focus.

**Learn more:** Physicians should explore these two helpful AMA Ed Hub™ modules: “Identifying and Responding to Suicide Risk” and “Physician Suicide and Support Identify At-Risk Physicians and Facilitate Access to Appropriate Care.”

This recent Leadership Viewpoints column by AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD, explains why now is the time to have a difficult talk about physician suicide.

Committed to making physician burnout a thing of the past, the AMA has studied, and is currently addressing, issues causing and fueling physician burnout—including time constraints, technology and regulations—to better understand and reduce the challenges physicians face. By focusing on factors



causing burnout at the system level, the AMA assesses an organization's well-being and offers guidance and targeted solutions to support physician well-being and satisfaction.