

# Congress passes Dr. Lorna Breen Act to promote physician mental health

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**What's the news:** The U.S. Senate approved the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act by a unanimous voice vote, and the legislation is expected to be signed into law soon by President Joe Biden.

The bill is designed to bolster the mental health infrastructure supporting physicians and other health professionals by establishing:

- Grants for health professionals to help create 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 to use available mental and behavioral health services.
- Grants for employee education and peer-support programming.

The legislation also funds a comprehensive study on the mental health and burnout of doctors and other health professionals.



Lorna Breen, MD

The bill is named after Lorna Breen, MD, who died by suicide in April 2020 following an intense stretch treating COVID-19 patients at the onset of the pandemic.

After recovering from COVID-19, she returned to her job in the busy emergency department of a Manhattan hospital and began struggling both physically and mentally. But her chief concern wasn't her failing health, it was the fear of losing her medical license or that she would get a reputation as someone who couldn't handle pressure if she sought help.

"The American Medical Association commends Congress for passing the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act," said AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, MD. "We mourn Dr. Breen and take solace that her death prompted a desperately needed effort to focus on the mental health of physicians."

Read more about Dr. Breen's story and why, to encourage physicians' healing, we must make it OK to ask for help.

**Why it's important:** The bill also calls for identifying and disseminating evidence-informed best practices for reducing and preventing suicide and burnout among health professionals, training them in appropriate strategies and promoting their mental and behavioral health and job satisfaction.

"During the pandemic, the AMA helped develop several different pieces of legislation focused on identifying burnout and promoting the mental health needs of physicians," said Dr. Harmon, a family physician in South Carolina.

"These issues have always been present in medicine, and the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed them to the forefront," he added. "The AMA is grateful the Breen family advocated for this legislation, and that Congress listened. It is a fitting legacy for Dr. Breen."

The AMA advocated federal support to address physician burnout stemming from treating COVID-19 patients at the onset of the pandemic and was an early supporter of the Coronavirus Health Care Worker Wellness Act and the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act.

The AMA worked closely with the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation to press for passage of the Lorna Breen Act in the 116th and 117th Congress.

More than half of U.S. physicians report experiencing substantial symptoms of burnout, with the most severe symptoms occurring among those working in emergency, family and internal medicine, according to a letter that AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD, sent to congressional leaders in support of the bill.

“Physicians are at a significantly increased risk of suicide compared to the general population, with suicide rates 40% higher in males and 130% higher in females,” Dr. Madara wrote.

While COVID-19 has certainly made conditions worse, the crisis predates the pandemic. One in 15 U.S. physicians had thoughts of taking their own life in the prior year, according to a national study by AMA researchers and colleagues conducted before the pandemic and published last July in *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*.

“Ensuring clinicians can freely seek mental health treatment and services without fear of professional setback means their mental health care needs can be resolved, rather than hidden away and suffered through,” the AMA and more than 30 other medical organizations said in a letter to the bill’s sponsors last March.

**Learn more:** Read about preventing physician suicide and why now is the time to have a difficult talk about physician suicide.

Discover how physicians and health systems can cut the stigma on seeking help and how states can help doctors get the confidential care they deserve.