

My Plan to Revolutionize Mental Health and Addiction Care

The United States and New Jersey are in the middle of a mental health and addiction crisis. Drug-related deaths in our state have increased by 150 percent since 2012 – and the highest fatal overdose rates are in South Jersey. The crisis among our youth is especially alarming. And fewer than half of returning veterans in need of mental health services receive any treatment.

This crisis is heartbreaking – but it is not inevitable.

I believe that our country must respond to the mental health and addiction crisis with the same urgency that we finally used to respond to other crises like HIV/AIDs. To do so, Congress needs to make mental health and addiction a national priority. We must partner with state and local governments, providing the resources they need to protect and heal our communities. We must respond with conviction, determination, and hope.

Sadly, our political leadership in Washington is failing us. While President Trump talked a big game, his actions belie his words. He largely [ignored](#) the recommendations of his Opioid Commission. He has callously called for [throwing](#) people with mental health conditions into institutions. And he has joined with House Republicans to try to take life-saving treatment options away from our neighbors.

I have dedicated my career to advocating for people with mental health and substance use disorders – and I will continue to fight for them in Congress.

My Ten Goals for Mental Health and Addiction Care

GOAL 1. Hold opioid manufacturers and insurers accountable

Pharmaceutical companies like Purdue Pharma lied about the addictive nature of opioids. And too many insurers continue to illegally discriminate against people with mental health and substance use disorders.

In Congress, I will fight to:

- Hold opioid manufacturers accountable—and make them pay for the harm they've cause to our families.
- Remove barriers to [medication-assisted treatment](#), which combines medication and behavioral therapies to treat substance use disorders. Though medication-assisted treatment is one of the most effective addiction therapies, few patients have access to it.
- End the [huge disparities](#) in reimbursement for mental health and addiction care.
- Fully implement the [Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act](#), which requires insurance companies cover mental health and addiction treatment to the same extent that they cover other medical care.

GOAL 2. Expand treatment options

There are many effective treatment options for mental health and addiction. But too few patients have access to some of the most effective, evidence-based therapies.

In Congress, I will fight to:

- Eliminate barriers to medication-assisted treatment and require community health centers that receive federal funding to provide this care.
- Expand [prescription drug monitoring programs](#), which states use to track opioid prescriptions and respond to the opioid epidemic in real time.
- Expand access to telehealth services, which are especially critical for people in rural areas. Insurers should be required to cover these services equally with services delivered in person.
- Invest in the federal mental health and addiction so that we continue to improve mental health and addiction treatments.

GOAL 3. Promote universal screenings

Our health care system should prioritize prevention and early intervention so that we can prevent, identify, diagnose, and treat mental health and substance use disorders as early as possible.

In Congress, I will fight to:

- Require that all health care facilities receiving federal funding conduct evidence-based mental health and substance use disorder screenings.
- Expand mental health screenings and care in schools, colleges and universities, at veterans health clinics, and throughout our justice system.
- Expand mental health and addiction education for physicians and other clinicians so that they can identify common mental health and substance use problems.

GOAL 4. Protect and improve the ACA

The Affordable Care Act dramatically expanded access to mental health and addiction treatment. But President Trump and Republicans in Congress are trying to repeal the ACA and take this coverage way from millions of people.

In Congress, I will fight to:

- Protect people with preexisting conditions like mental health and substance use disorders.
- Reverse Republicans' efforts to weaken the ACA, which have caused healthcare premiums and out-of-pocket costs to rise.
- Provide greater financial assistance to middle-class families purchasing insurance.
- Allow Medicare to negotiate for lower drug prices.

GOAL 5. Equip our first responders

Our first responders are on the front lines of the opioid epidemic. They must have the tools and resources they need to provide life-saving care.

In Congress, I will fight to:

- Ensure that all first responders carry the life-saving overdose antidote naloxone, which should be as available as defibrillators are for heart attacks.
- Fund mobile outreach teams to help connect people with treatment.
- Provide [crisis intervention training](#) to law enforcement to give them the tools to help people having a mental health crisis access treatment and avoid entering the justice system.

GOAL 6. Reform our criminal justice system

Our criminal justice system is broken. We spend billions of taxpayer dollars incarcerating people who actually just need in mental health or addiction treatment. And our jails and prisons are [ill-equipped](#) to provide such care, leaving too many incarcerated people in crisis or unable to reenter their communities.

In Congress, I will fight to:

- Divert people charged with nonviolent offenses into treatment.
- Expand mental health and [drug courts](#), which allow people to enroll in long-term treatment and recovery programs instead of receiving jail sentences.
- Ensure that incarcerated people have access to mental health and addiction care.
- Provide mental health and addiction screenings to people who come in contact with the justice system to identify treatment needs and opportunities for diversion.
- Expunge nonviolent drug convictions from criminal records upon successful completion of treatment.

GOAL 7. Invest in our schools

It is critical that we provide mental health and wellness services both in schools and in early childhood learning centers. By prioritizing social and emotional learning from the earliest grades, we can help give our children the tools they need to succeed in school and throughout their lives.

In Congress, I will fight to:

- Increase funding for school counselors, nurses, and psychologists, so that every child access to a range of community services to help them thrive.
- Make free preschool available to every child.
- Provide mental health literacy trainings for teachers and school personnel.
- Require Medicaid to reimburse school-based mental health services.
- Increase funding for mental health and addiction services at colleges and universities – and require colleges that receive federal financial assistance to invest in these critical programs.

GOAL 8. Honor our veterans

The men and women who put their lives on the line to serve our country deserve world-class care when they come home. Yet every year we lose thousands of our veterans to the invisible wounds of war.

In Congress, I will fight to:

- Make sure that all returning veterans and active-duty military are screened for post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health and addiction challenges.
- Increase outreach to veterans to connect them with services, including by using other veterans in outreach and support.
- Hire more mental health professionals within the VA.
- End veterans' homelessness by making sure that every veteran has access to safe, supportive housing.

GOAL 9. Meet our communities' needs

The mental health and addiction crisis affects virtually every family in our district, including my own.

In Congress, I will fight to:

- Connect pregnant women with opioid use disorder treatment and expand neonatal units for infants exposed to opioids.
- Provide greater support for state foster care programs, which are increasingly overburdened by the opioid epidemic.
- Ban harmful "conversion therapy" for LGBTQ youth.
- End youth homelessness by providing safe and supportive housing, funding crisis response services, and providing education and employment opportunities.
- Ensure mental health and addiction providers reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.

GOAL 10. Improve suicide prevention

Suicide rates are increasing dramatically across the United States. Suicide is sadly now the second-leading cause of death among young people. This has had a tragic impact on New Jersey. More than 100 preteen girls tried to overdose in New Jersey between January 2018 and May 2019; and at least three students died by suicide at Rowan University last semester alone.

In Congress, I will fight to:

- Fully fund and implement the new [988](#) suicide prevention hotline.
- Help schools develop and implement suicide prevention policies.
- Require hospitals participating in Medicare and Medicaid to implement [Zero Suicide](#), a framework that helps health care systems identify individuals with suicide risk, treat suicidal thoughts and behaviors, train providers, and relentlessly improve care for those who seek help.
- Enact commonsense gun safety policies, like distributing low-cost gun locks and partnering with gun retailers around suicide prevention efforts.