

April 22, 2020

The Honorable Roy Blunt
United States Senate
Washington, DC

The Honorable Josh Hawley
United States Senate
Washington, DC

Dear Senator Blunt and Senator Hawley,

As Congress considers a new legislative package in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Show-Me School-Based Health Alliance urges you to provide critical funding to support the continued operations of school-based health (SBH) programs. As K-12 public schools across the nation have closed in response to this pandemic, most SBH programs have been forced to temporarily close as well. Without additional funding, we fear many SBH programs closures will be permanent, which will leave thousands of youth without critical healthcare access.

The Show-Me School-Based Health Alliance (MOSBHA) is the Missouri State Affiliate of the National School-Based Health Alliance established to improve the health of children and youth by advancing and advocating for school-based health (SBH) programs. The MOSBHA connects people from across the state to learn from and inspire each other and to leverage resources and expertise to increase access to healthcare for children by promoting the continued growth of school-based health.

School-based health programs are critical access points that provide comprehensive care, including primary care and behavioral and oral health services, as well as prevention and early intervention services—to children and adolescents in their school, a location that is safe, convenient, and accessible. School-based health programs provide this care through partnerships with community health providers, such as Federally-Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), local health departments, hospitals, schools, and other community institutions. Currently, more than 375 SBH programs operate in rural, urban, and suburban Missouri communities, serving primarily low-income and medically underserved children and adolescents who would otherwise have untreated chronic health conditions. Due to lack of access to SBH programs during school closures as well as other restrictions to accessing preventative and routine healthcare related to COVID-19, our most vulnerable children and adolescents face significant gaps in care.

School-based health programs are a time-tested model for improving health and education outcomes. Decades of research exists to support the role of SBH programs in reducing health care costs and removing barriers to health care as well as improving attendance and school connectedness. The Community Preventive Services Task Force (an independent panel of public health and prevention experts) recommends SBH programs as an “effective intervention for improving health equity and influencing health and educational outcomes.” School-based health programs lead to improved health and educational outcomes, short and long-term community benefits, a reduction in health inequities, and a decrease in unnecessary emergency room visits, which saves money & resources.

As Missouri’s FQHCs, local health departments, hospitals and other community health providers respond to this pandemic, tough choices are being made on where to focus limited resources, services, and clinical staff. For many SBH providers, this has meant layoffs, furloughs, and reassignment to non-school-based sites. While many SBH

programs have expanded the use of telehealth to continue providing care during this time, this is not a sustainable business model for the long-term. Additional federal and state funding for SBH programs will ensure that programs can continue to provide invaluable care for students and families, even while schools remain closed for the foreseeable future.

In partnership with the National School-Based Health Alliance and other State School-Based Health Affiliates, we recommend funding **\$100 million in the upcoming, fourth coronavirus response package for a new grant program within the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)** to support school-based health programs. There are over 375 SBH programs in MO that are uniquely poised to address the immense physical and mental health needs of students and families resulting from COVID-19. Additional funding for these programs would enable expanded access to health care and mental health services for students and families, even while schools remain closed, avoiding potential gaps in care both during and after the pandemic. With additional funding, these SBH programs can provide expanded mental health services via telemedicine and deploy more staff to diagnose and treat those with COVID-19, including case managers and nurses who support families when a family member has tested positive. The funding may also establish new programs in communities that are hardest hit by the virus and lack access to quality health care, especially in areas where hospitals have closed. Funding would also support preparations for school re-entry and the potential for a second peak of COVID-19 infections anticipated for the fall, which will coincide with students returning to school. Specifically, SBH programs can:

- close the immunization gap created by the current situation of providers not seeing patients in person and critical to re-opening schools;
- provide COVID testing if approved (or any other diagnostic testing);
- support tracking cases & quarantine efforts to reduce exposure and spread of COVID-19;
- provide preventative & urgent care for chronic health conditions (i.e., asthma), which reduces ED visits;
- provide medical supplies (PPEs, thermometers, etc.) that schools/school nurses cannot currently access;
- support establishment of school cleaning & sanitizing procedures; and
- educate staff on the symptoms of COVID-19, helping to establish protocols for screening, assessing symptoms, and providing basic health education.

Missouri children and adolescents will likely not step foot in their school again before Fall. For many, this will mean months of untreated chronic illness, missed preventive care visits and required vaccinations, and compounded unmet mental health needs. For many of these children, they will return to school with the added trauma of having lost loved ones and the stress of economic instability within their families. We also know this virus will not disappear when school returns, and SBH programs will have a critical role to play as frontline responders in the schools to control further spread. Now more than ever, no school or community can afford to lose their SBH program. We urge you to act now to prevent this.

We look forward to continuing to work with you to address these challenges.

Sincerely,



Molly Ticknor, MA, ATR, LPC
Executive Director, Show-Me School-Based Health Alliance of MO

Cc: US Congressional Members