

ROBERT P. CASEY, JR.  
PENNSYLVANIA

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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 16, 2024

The Honorable Miriam E. Delphin-Rittmon, Ph.D.  
Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
5600 Fishers Lane  
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear Assistant Secretary Delphin-Rittmon:

I write today to express my concern over the increasing rates of substance use disorders (SUDs) among older adults and the challenges of collecting and understanding data on the issue. Although the prevalence of SUDs tends to be lower among older adults compared to other age groups, older adults are not immune to these issues, and the opioid epidemic is an evolving and growing crisis.

Recently, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) 2022 National Survey of Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) reported that nearly four million older adults (nearly seven percent of all those over 65 years of age) had a SUD in 2022. Of those, 1.8 million older adults had a drug use disorder and 2.3 million had an alcohol use disorder.<sup>1</sup> Mortality rates from drug overdoses among people 65 and over have more than tripled between 2000 and 2020, and alcohol-related mortality among this population has increased over the past several decades, including by more than 18 percent from 2019 to 2020 alone.<sup>2</sup> The number of older adults needing treatment for substance use has also tripled from 1.7 million in 2000 to 5.7 million in 2020.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2022 National Survey of Drug Use and Health, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (access Nov. 21, 2023), [Section 5 PE Tables – Results from the 2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed Tables, SAMHSA, CBHSQ](#)

<sup>2</sup> Drug & Alcohol Deaths on the Rise Among Older Americans, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (accessed Jan. 10, 2024), [Drug & Alcohol Deaths on the Rise Among Older Americans \(cdc.gov\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> At a Glance: Substance Use Disorder in Older Adults, National Center for Equitable Care for Elders (accessed Jan. 10, 2024), [march 2020 - sud fact sheet.pdf \(harvard.edu\)](#).

Further, one in four older adults experience mental health issues, which often co-occur with SUDs.<sup>4</sup>

Despite with these shocking statistics, the knowledge base regarding older adults with SUDs is limited. There is less data, less research, and far fewer resources than for other populations. Overall, there are three areas of understanding that would benefit from having more robust and comprehensive data collection: (1) the scope of substance use disorders among older adults, (2) the extent to which older adults are able to access integrated physical and mental health care, and (3) the extent to which older adults are able to access wraparound and other social supports to meet their unique needs.

First, substance use disorder among older adults is often underdiagnosed and undertreated, in large part due to a lack of available data and research.<sup>5</sup> In order to better understand the scope of this issue, it is critical to improve surveys and the survey process to gather more data. For example, although the NSDUH is one of the most comprehensive surveys on substance use and mental health trends across all populations, its sampling is less representative for older adults than for other populations, as it does not include individuals in nursing homes or other congregate settings in which older adults often reside.<sup>6</sup> Although other sources like SAMHSA's Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS) can help expound on data in the NSDUH, very few older adults actually seek treatment at substance use disorder treatment facilities and are subsequently underrepresented in this survey. Therefore, I encourage expanding efforts to survey older adults to provide both more insight into specific types of substance use among this population<sup>7</sup> and to be inclusive of settings where older adults may reside, including nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

Second, older adults tend to be high utilizers of health care services and are more likely to require services provided by different providers.<sup>8</sup> Increased substance use in this population is associated with a concurrent increase in chronic medical problems, pain, polypharmacy, and mental health disorders more than in other populations.<sup>9</sup> However, the data on the utilization of services for older adults' various conditions, including substance use care, typically remain separate. This fragmented approach to data collection and understanding of older adults' health

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<sup>4</sup> *Why We Should All Care About Older Adult Mental Health & Substance Use – And What We Can Do About It*, National Coalition on Mental Health and Aging (accessed Jan. 10, 2024), [National Coalition on Mental Health and Aging – Your resource for information about mental health and aging \(ncmha.org\)](https://www.ncmha.org/your-resource-for-information-about-mental-health-and-aging).

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Dufort and Zainab Samaan, *Problematic Opioid Use Among Older Adults: Epidemiology, Adverse Outcomes and Treatment Considerations*, *Drugs Aging* (2021), 38(12): 1043-1053, [10.1007/s40266-021-00893-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40266-021-00893-z)

<sup>6</sup> Christina Caron, *Why Some Seniors Are Choosing Pot Over Pills*, *New York Times* (accessed Jan. 10, 2024), [Cannabis for Seniors: Why Older Adults Are Opting for Medical Marijuana - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/10/health/cannabis-seniors.html).

<sup>7</sup> Jacobi Elliott et al., *Coordinating care for older adults in primary care settings: understanding the current context*, *BMC Primary Care* (2018), 19(137), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12875-018-0821-7>.

<sup>8</sup> Kimberly Bonvissuto, *Care coordination, policy changes can improve mental health services for older adults*, *McKnight's Senior Living* (accessed Jan. 10, 2024), [Care coordination, policy changes can improve mental health services for older adults - McKnight's Senior Living \(mcknightsseniorliving.com\)](https://www.mcknightsseniorliving.com/care-coordination-policy-changes-can-improve-mental-health-services-for-older-adults).


<sup>9</sup> *Public Health Data Warehouse (PHD)*, Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services Office of Population Health (accessed Jan. 10, 2024), [Public Health Data Warehouse \(PHD\) | Mass.gov](https://www.mass.gov/public-health-data-warehouse).

status exacerbates the risk of underdiagnosis and undertreatment of SUDs in older adults.<sup>1011</sup> Our understanding of SUDs and important comorbid conditions among older adults would benefit from improved data collection on the extent to which older adults are receiving integrated physical and mental health services.

Third, it is critical to improve data collection on the ecosystem of social services, such as safe and affordable housing, adequate food and nutrition, and accessible transportation, that are available for and utilized by older adults. This can improve understanding of how social, economic, and environmental factors affect the overall mental health of older adults.<sup>12</sup> Our increased understanding will aid in designing wraparound supports for our aging loved ones and their caregivers as they receive SUD treatment and prevention services in a way that best supports long-term recovery.<sup>13</sup>

As our aging population increases, SUD among older adults represents a growing crisis nationwide. I am committed to ensuring that older adults are able to access the treatment and recovery services they need. I look forward to working with you to improve data collection efforts and better our understanding on how to best support older adults with SUDs.

Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.  
United States Senator



John Fetterman  
United States Senator

<sup>10</sup> Joel Miller, *How to Improve Access to Mental Health and Substance Use Care for Older Adults*, National Council on Aging (accessed Jan. 10, 2024), [How Do We Address the Mental Health Crisis Among Older Adults? \(ncoa.org\)](https://www.ncoa.org/article/how-do-we-address-the-mental-health-crisis-among-older-adults).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

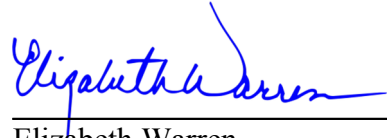
<sup>12</sup> Rossana Lau-Ng et. al., *Barriers Facing Older Adults with Substance Use Disorders in Post-Acute Care Settings*, American Society on Aging – Generations (accessed Jan. 10, 2024), [Barriers for Elders with SUDs in Post-Acute Care \(asaging.org\)](https://www.asaging.org/publications/barriers-for-elders-with-suds-in-post-acute-care).

<sup>13</sup> *National Survey of Drug Use and Health Estimates*, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (access Nov. 21, 2023), [Who is included in NSDUH estimates? How are they chosen? | CBHSQ Data \(samhsa.gov\)](https://www.samhsa.gov/data/national-survey-of-drug-use-and-health-estimates)



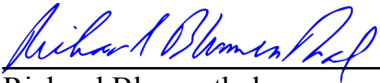
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Kirsten Gillibrand  
United States Senator



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Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator



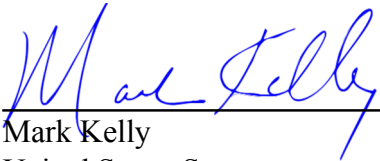
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Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator



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Raphael Warnock  
United States Senator



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Mark Kelly  
United States Senator