

The Honorable Senator Susan Collins
413 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: Please Co-Sponsor S. 671: The Seniors Mental Health Access Improvement Act of 2009.

Dear Senator Collins:

I am writing to strongly urge you to co-sponsor S.671, The Seniors Mental Health Access Improvement Act, which would establish Medicare coverage for licensed professional mental health counselors. Because of your past support for the programs to expand access to health care services, particularly for elderly and rural populations, I believe that this legislation would be important to you. As your constituent, I want to thank you for your previous sponsorship of S.158, Access to Affordable Health Care Act. This Act did a great deal to address many issues of inequity in Medicare. However, more must be done to update the baseline Medicare mental health benefit, which has undergone little alteration in the past 20 years. This inaction has consequences.

S. 671 would provide means to:

Improve Access In Rural Areas and Among Elderly Citizens:

50% of rural counties have no practicing psychologists, psychiatrists, or social workers. Because the State of Maine has a large rural population, with 15% of its entire population age 65 or older, this legislation is of particular importance for our state. It is shocking to note that full two thirds of rural residents with mental illness symptoms receive no treatment at all. As a direct result of this lack of access, older Americans with chronic medical conditions *and* major depression (nearly 2 million senior citizens nationwide) have significantly higher rates of disability than those with either condition alone.

Make Medicare A Better Purchaser of Mental Health Care: Inpatient psychiatric hospital utilization by elderly Medicare recipients is extraordinarily high – particularly when compared to psychiatric hospitalization rates for patients covered by Medicaid, VA, TRICARE and private health insurance. To the extent that fully one third of these expensive inpatient placements are caused by clinical depression and addiction disorders, it is strikingly clear that additional community-based mental health services provided by licensed professional mental health counselors will reduce unneeded hospitalizations.

The bottom line is: lack of access to mental health care is increasing the burden of disability on our senior citizens and rural communities, as well as the financial burden on the Medicare program. Coverage of services provided by Mental Health Counselors represents a critical factor in alleviating this strain. Therefore, I would like to add my voice to many of the over 700 Licensed Clinical Professional Counselors in the State of Maine in asking you to please, take action today and Co-sponsor S. 671.

Sincerely,