

June 7, 2006

The Honorable Michael B. Enzi, Chairman
The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy, Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Enzi and Kennedy:

The undersigned health and mental health organizations are writing to urge you to support the inclusion of vital mental health provisions of the Positive Aging Act (S.1116) in the bill to reauthorize the Older Americans Act.

An estimated 20% of older adults in the U.S. experience a mental health problem that is not a normal part of aging. The most common mental health disorders among older adults are anxiety, depression, and cognitive impairment. These disorders can have a significant impact on both physical and mental health, often leading to increased illness, disability, and mortality. In fact, older adults currently have the highest rates of suicide of any age group in the U.S., and depression is its foremost risk factor. Research indicates that up to 75% of older adults who die by suicide have visited a primary care physician within a month of taking their own life. Knowledge about how to diagnose and effectively treat mental disorders is simply not reaching our front-line health care professionals.

These missed opportunities to diagnose and treat mental health disorders are taking a significant toll on older adults and increasing the burden on families, caregivers, and our health care system. In order to ensure that our seniors do not continue to fall through the cracks, we urge you to include vital mental health provisions of the Positive Aging Act in the bill to reauthorize the Older Americans Act.

The Positive Aging Act amendments to the Older Americans Act would take important steps toward addressing the mental health needs of older Americans by designating an Office of Older Adult Mental Health Services in the Administration on Aging, which would provide grants to states for the development and operation of systems for providing mental health screening and treatment services to older individuals who lack access to such services.

We urge you to make mental health screening and treatment services available and accessible to older Americans by including this vital mental health language in the bill to reauthorize the Older Americans Act.

Sincerely,