February 8, 2021

The Honorable Xavier Becerra

Attorney General

State of California

Department of Justice

1300 I Street Sacramento, CA 95814

**RE: Appointment of HHS Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use**

Dear Secretary Becerra,

Congratulations on being selected Secretary of Health and Human Services. We are excited about the future of healthcare in America under your leadership. The national dialogue on mental illness is of critical importance and has been largely stagnant since the Kennedy Administration. We are advocates for people living with the symptoms of severe and disabling brain diseases, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and we are writing to you about the appointment of the Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use.

Please support recommendations by the [Treatment Advocacy Center](https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/fixing-the-system/features-and-news/4366-open-letter-to-president-biden-regarding-the-appointment-of-an-assistant-secretary-of-health-and-human-services-for-mental-health-and-substance-use) to appoint an Assistant Secretary who will ensure that the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) prioritizes the needs of people with severe mental illness consistent with Congress’ intent in creating the position as part of the 21st Century Cures Act. That legislation passed with wide bipartisan support, was signed into law by President Obama in December of 2016, and has multiple sections that recognize the importance of prioritizing treatment of severe mental illness (SMI), not the least of which was the creation of the Assistant Secretary position.

Thank you for your vote for this piece of landmark legislation as a member of the House of Representatives. We appreciate that you understand the importance of prioritizing serious mental illness within the Department of Health and Human Services. We ask you to further prioritize this urgent and underserved need as Secretary.

Critical to the survival and well-being of people who suffer from SMI is removing policy barriers to psychiatric treatment and care. Like diseases that cause dementia in elderly people, schizophrenia and other serious psychiatric disorders often impair the ability for a person to self-manage. About half of the time, the most serious mental illness conditions include a symptom that disables a person’s ability to “see” the illness itself (anosognosia), rendering them unable to initiate their own care.

Members of our grassroots organizations and coalitions have close relatives with SMI and know first-hand what happens when a person cannot understand their illness or know how to care for it within a system that has wrongly prioritized choice and self-determination for individuals who lack the ability to make rational decisions. Our loved ones have been incarcerated and discarded into homelessness. Many have died from suicide or medical complications caused by poor care.

If we are to build a mental health system that encompasses an appropriate inclusionary continuum of coordinated psychiatric treatment and care, we must commit appropriate attention and resources to patients who are the most severely impacted. In the past, an errant popular belief that “everyone can recover” from SMI has directed scarce resources away from this critically ill population and focused almost entirely on individuals with the capacity to self-manage. The result includes the alarming reality that 1 of 10 individuals in a mental illness crisis goes to jail instead of a hospital.

Our families are counting on the Biden Administration to adjust past inequities and move forward with unity around 21st Century science that embraces evidence-based practices for lifesaving care. We recognize and support the many organizations working to build a functional system of treatment and care for people living with severe mental illnesses. Nevertheless, there is much more that needs to be done. Severe mental illness is the humanitarian crisis of our times.

Historically, the tragic stories of families like ours have been excluded from policy decisions. We are united firmly that this cannot continue. The horrific circumstances of people who suffer immeasurable harm because of a system of “care” that punishes and neglects them instead of providing access to evidence-based treatment is unconscionable. We can do so much better as a civilized society. You have power to begin correcting these errors by appointing an Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use who understands the history and current problems with SMI treatment in America and will listen to people with real life experiences.

With respect and hope for collaboration.

Janet Hays

Co-signed:

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**The National Shattering Silence Coalition** speaks out about federal, state, and local policies that impact adults and children living with serious brain disorders (SBD), commonly referred to as “serious mental illness”, and advocates for change

**Robert S. Laitman, MD,**

Board of Directors: Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America (SARDAA)

Board member: National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI - New York).

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#### Dede Ranahan

Author, “Tomorrow Was Yesterday - Explosive First-Person Indictments of the US Mental Health System — Mothers Across the Nation Tell It Like It is” | with 64 Co- Authors (Amazon)

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