

U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY



CHAIRMAN Special Committee on Aging

**Chairman Bob Casey's Opening Statement
"Mental Health Care for Older Adults: Raising Awareness, Addressing Stigma, and
Providing Support"
May 19, 2022**

Good morning. Today, we will discuss a topic of growing and urgent national concern: the mental health crisis that is ravaging our Nation, including our Nation's seniors. It is a topic that too often is discussed behind closed doors due to unrelenting and unwarranted stigma. An estimated one in four older adults experiences a mental health condition, including depression, anxiety or substance use disorder. In 2020, Americans who were 85 or older had the highest suicide rate of any age group. Many seniors are in pain and struggling to find help. In the year before the pandemic, more than 30,000 older Pennsylvanians looked to the state mental health authority for support. I imagine that number would be even higher if more seniors knew this kind of care was available. And again, that was before the pandemic.

The pandemic only worsened this crisis, as older adults were forced to isolate in their homes, away from their family and friends. The resulting social isolation and loneliness has taken a terrible toll on older adults across the country. Research shows that social isolation has the same adverse impact on health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and it is correlated with increased risk of depression. Today, we will hear from a panel of

witnesses who will highlight the gaps in our mental health system, particularly for older adults. And they will offer solutions. We will hear from Jim Klasen [KLASS-EN] from Elkins Park, Pennsylvania in Montgomery County. Jim and his family know the harsh realities of stigma all too well. He knows the unfairness of being judged for needing help with a mental health condition. In his testimony, Jim says the support he has received enables him to now share his experience without shame. The reality is that too many older adults today face fragmented systems and roadblocks that prevent them from accessing the support that they need.

Thankfully, both Congress, House and Senate, and the Biden Administration are focused on this important issue. President Biden recently announced his “unity agenda” which calls for expansions in the mental health workforce and also promotes mental health care in the community. It is an important step forward, and it is time for Congress to act.

Ranking Member Scott and I just passed a bipartisan resolution, the very first of its kind, to raise awareness of the impact of mental health conditions and substance use disorder on older adults. Today, we are also introducing the Advancing Integration in Medicare and Medicaid Act, which requires states to develop a plan to address fragmentation in Medicare and Medicaid. These are the very programs which so many older adults rely upon for their mental health. I am also introducing legislation that will give states funding to execute those plans, so individuals can have meaningful access to all of their health care needs. This includes primary care, mental health, long-term care and more. We’ve got work to do.