



**CONTACT: Lynda Jackson
774-212-0286**

Statement by Lora Pellegrini, President and CEO of the Massachusetts Association of Health Plans, on *Mental Health ABC Act 2.0: Addressing Barriers to Care*

The Massachusetts Association of Health Plans and our member health plans, nationally recognized for quality of care and member satisfaction, are committed to providing high quality and comprehensive behavioral health benefits, in compliance with State and Federal Mental Health Parity Laws.

While we will need to review the language of the bill in detail, we are supportive of many of the provisions included in ABC 2.0. We applaud the Senate and, in particular, Senate President Karen Spilka for her collaboration and leadership in seeking to improve access to behavioral health care services and end the stigma associated with behavioral health treatment. We thank her for her willingness to work with us as the Senate developed the bill and we look forward to continuing to work with her and Senate leadership, including Senator Cindy Friedman, Chair of the Joint Committee on Health Care Financing, Senator Julian Cyr, Chair of the Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use and Recovery, and Senator Michael Rodrigues, Chair of the Senate Ways and Means Committee, as the legislation moves forward.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing mental health issues for many residents of the Commonwealth, and so it is important to focus on prevention and screening to ensure that behavioral health needs are not overlooked. To that end, MAHP supports provisions in the bill that would provide coverage for an annual mental health wellness exam for members.

In addition, as evidenced by the increase in emergency department (ED) boarding, the issues facing our delivery system are multifaceted and require the participation and commitment of the entire health care sector. While collaboration by all stakeholders has led to meaningful progress in recent years, Massachusetts continues to experience significant challenges with boarding of psychiatric patients in the EDs. The Senate bill takes an important first step to reduce boarding by requiring EDs to initiate treatment for patients in need of psychiatric care, which will reduce the amount of time spent by patients in the ED and potentially alleviate the need for inpatient care. The Senate bill also establishes an online portal to improve access to data on available beds.

Finally, the Senate bill updates the state's enforcement of the State and Federal Mental Health Parity Laws, which apply to health plans. However, in order to achieve our shared goals of parity in the delivery of health care services, the entire health care system, not simply health plans, must be held accountable.

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