

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 20, 2025

Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Ave. SW  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Kennedy,

We write to express our deep concerns regarding the Make America Healthy Again Commission's troubling characterization of mental and behavioral health medication and your recent comments promoting disproven and outright false theories about these important treatments. These statements further stigmatize the mental and behavioral health challenges that one in five Americans live with, and can have a chilling effect on Americans seeking scientifically sound, medically necessary, and appropriate care.

The Make America Healthy Again Commission, established by Executive Order 14212 on February 13, 2025 and which met for the first time on March 11, 2025, is directed to assess the "threat posed by the prescription of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, antipsychotics, mood stabilizers, [and] stimulants."<sup>1</sup> While the focus of this portion of the Commission is making children healthy, the characterization that these medications pose a "threat" will have far-reaching implications for Americans of all ages seeking and accessing mental health treatment. In other recent statements, you have doubled down on your belief in the link between school shooters and psychotropic drugs and in comments during your Senate confirmation hearing to the Department of Health and Human Services, you compared Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) to heroin.

Taken together, this paints a troubling picture of your views on mental illness and treatment among children and adults. As Secretary of Health and Human Services, overseeing our nation's health care system, you are in a position of great power to impact mental health interventions and treatments available to Americans. It is imperative that you follow the well-established and widely accepted scientific and medical consensus about the causes and treatments for mental and behavioral health issues.

Mental illness is common in the United States and across the world. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that nearly 60 million U.S. adults live with a mental illness<sup>2</sup>. In 2022, nineteen percent of adults who received mental health treatment received prescription medication from their provider. Thirteen percent of U.S. adults received counseling, and twenty three percent of adults received counseling and medication.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Exec. Order No. 14212, (2025, February 13).

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/establishing-the-presidents-make-america-healthy-again-commission/>

<sup>2</sup> *Mental illness*. (2024, September). National Institute of Mental Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness>

<sup>3</sup> Panchal, N., & Lo, J. (2024, August 1). *Exploring the rise in mental health care use by demographics and insurance status*. Exploring the Rise in Mental Health Care Use by Demographics and Insurance Status.

An estimated 49.5 percent of adolescents have had a mental health disorder at some point in their lives, with the most common mental health disorders in adolescence relating to anxiety, depression, attention deficit-hyperactivity, and eating.<sup>4</sup> From 2018 to 2019, the last year for which comprehensive data is available, the CDC reports that 43 percent of children between the ages of 3 and 17 took medication for an emotional, concentrational, or behavioral condition.<sup>5</sup> Youth mental health needs have only increased in the past five years. Given the prevalence of mental illness among youth and adults in the United States, your accusations and inflammatory comments are deeply troubling.

You have called for research into the possibility of a link between antidepressants and school shootings. In 2019, research analyzing FBI data on ‘educational shootings’ from 2000-2017 found that the majority of school shooters *were not previously* treated with psychotropic medications. Of those who were, no direct or causal association was found.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, experts at the Columbia Center of Prevention and Evaluation in collaboration with experts from the New York State Psychiatric Institute compiled the world’s largest catalog of reported mass murder (more than three deaths) from 1900-2019. Their research concluded that the vast majority of mass shootings and mass murder are committed by people *without* mental illness, and certainly not psychotic illness. In fact, in the rare case that someone with a severe mental illness (SMI) commits a mass murder, they are *less likely* to use firearms.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to your harmful comment attempting to link psychotropic medications to mass shootings, you also said that SSRIs are addictive. To be precise, you stated during your confirmation hearing, “I know people, including members of my family, who’ve had a much worse time getting off of SSRIs than people having getting off of heroin.” In contrast, Keith Humphreys, a Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, characterized antidepressants and heroin as existing in “different universes” in terms of addiction risk.<sup>8</sup> Of course, like any medication, the usage and stoppage of SSRIs should be a decision made between a patient and their provider with continued monitoring and consultation.

These inflammatory statements do nothing to improve public health and safety or help increase access to care for those with mental health issues or with a mental illness. By falsely equating psychotropic drugs with school shootings and falsely comparing SSRIs to heroin, you are reinforcing harmful stereotypes and perpetuating negative stigma aimed at those with a mental

<https://www.kff.org/mental-health/issue-brief/exploring-the-rise-in-mental-health-care-use-by-demographics-and-insurance-status/>

<sup>4</sup> *Mental Health for Adolescents*. HHS Office of Population Affairs. <https://opa.hhs.gov/adolescent-health/mental-health-adolescents>

<sup>5</sup> *Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Children’s Mental Health. (2025, January 31) <https://www.cdc.gov/children-mental-health/data-research/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> Hall RCW, Friedman SH, Sorrentino R, Lapchenko M, Marcus A, Ellis R. The myth of school shooters and psychotropic medications. *Behav Sci Law*. 2019 Sep;37(5):540-558. doi: 10.1002/bsl.2429. Epub 2019 Sep 12. PMID: 31513302.

<sup>7</sup> Brucato G et al (2021). Psychotic symptoms in mass shootings v. mass murders not involving firearms: findings from the Columbia mass murder database. *Psychological Medicine* 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291721000076>

<sup>8</sup> Mann, B., & Riddle, K. (2025, January 30). *Antidepressants harder to quit than heroin? fact-checking RFK Jr.*. Antidepressants Harder to Quit than Heroin? Fact-Checking RFK Jr. <https://www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2025/01/30/nx-s1-5281164/antidepressants-ssris-rfk-jr-heroin>

health issue or mental illness, and your words are especially impactful as Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Fear of judgment and discrimination can cause those living with a mental health condition or illness to delay or avoid care, which will only increase suffering and may lead to deteriorating conditions and increasing symptoms.<sup>9</sup> Negative stereotypes about medication may deter people from exploring treatment options that could help them.

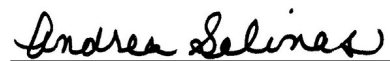
A mental health illness is exactly as the name says, an illness. Similar to a physical health condition or illness, sometimes medication is necessary for treatment. For individuals with mental illness, it is no different. In addition to therapy, medications may be necessary and appropriate. For individuals living with moderate or severe depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, or other conditions, medication can alleviate symptoms so they can function normally and have improved quality of life.<sup>10</sup>

We urge you to retract your harmful and false comments on mental illness and the usage of SSRIs. The American people want to see the federal government address the burden of mental and behavioral health challenges, for which there is much more bipartisan work to be done. But it is imperative that in doing so, we follow research and best practice guidance, and that harmful stereotypes and stigma are not reinforced.

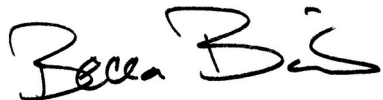
Sincerely,



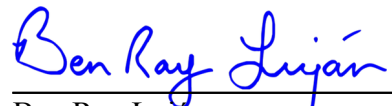
Tina Smith  
United States Senator



Andrea Salinas  
Member of Congress



Becca Balint  
Member of Congress



Ben Ray Lujan  
United States Senator

---

<sup>9</sup> *Mental Health for Adolescents*. HHS Office of Population Affairs. <https://opa.hhs.gov/adolescent-health/mental-health-adolescents>

<sup>10</sup> Ross, S. (2024, February 7). *Six Myths and Facts about Mental Illness*. NAMI. <https://www.nami.org/stigma/six-myths-and-facts-about-mental-illness/>



Alex Padilla  
United States Senator



Paul Tonko  
Member of Congress



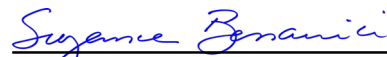
Jim Tokuda  
Member of Congress



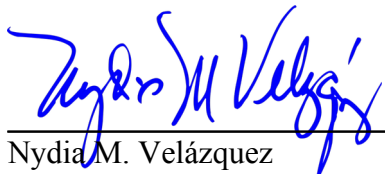
Lloyd Doggett  
Member of Congress



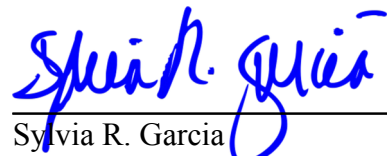
Bonnie Watson Coleman  
Member of Congress



Suzanne Bonamici  
Member of Congress



Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress



Sylvia R. Garcia  
Member of Congress



Raul Ruiz, M.D.  
Member of Congress



Zoe Lofgren  
Member of Congress



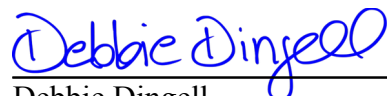
Julie Johnson  
Member of Congress



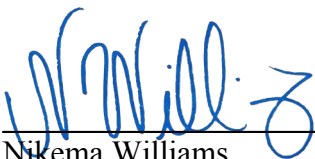
Donald S. Beyer Jr.  
Member of Congress



Gabe Amo  
Member of Congress



Debbie Dingell  
Member of Congress



---

Nikema Williams  
Member of Congress



---

Danny K. Davis  
Member of Congress



---

Eleanor Holmes Norton  
Member of Congress



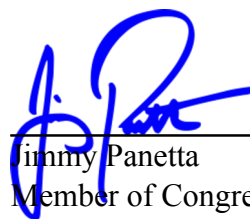
---

Shri Thanedar  
Member of Congress



---

Pramila Jayapal  
Member of Congress



---

Jimmy Panetta  
Member of Congress



---

Seth Moulton  
Member of Congress



---

Marc A. Veasey  
Member of Congress