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CONTACT: Laura Capps/Melissa Wagoner
202-224-2633

KENNEDY, COLLEAGUES ANNOUNCE SENATE CAUCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH REFORM

Washington, D.C.—Senators Edward M. Kennedy, Pete V. Domenici, Gordon Smith, and Tom Harkin jointly announced the establishment of a Senate Caucus on Mental Health Reform to educate fellow members and highlight the importance of mental health awareness. This caucus coincides with a reconvening of the former Members of the President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health. The purpose of the caucus is to educate Members of the Senate about the importance of making mental health a national priority and early access, recovery and quality in mental health services the hallmarks of our nation’s mental health system. The reconvening is being sponsored by the Campaign for Mental Health Reform, a coalition of 16 national mental health organizations.

Senator Kennedy said, “The senate mental health caucus will work in a bipartisan way to educate congress on the importance of addressing mental health as a national priority. No one is exempt from the human toll of mental illness and it is time to end the discrimination and stigma that millions of Americans face each day.”

In July 2003, the President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health released its groundbreaking report entitled “Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America.” The Commission found the U.S. mental health system “fragmented and in disarray, lead[ing] to unnecessary and costly disability, homelessness, school failure and incarceration.” The Commission called for a “fundamental transformation” of the mental health system in which: Americans understand that mental health is essential to overall health; mental health is consumer and family driven; disparities in mental health services are eliminated; early mental health screening, assessment, and referral to services are common practice; excellent mental health care is delivered and research is accelerated; technology is used to access mental health care and information.

Yet, in the first two years following release of the Commission’s report:

- 63,000 Americans died by suicide—more than by homicide;
- More than 300,000 Americans with mental illnesses were incarcerated instead of treated;
- 25,000 families relinquished custody of their children due to inadequate mental health services; and
- The American economy lost \$150 billion in productivity due to unaddressed mental health needs.

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