

Protecting Frontline Health Care Professionals
Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act (S.610/H.R. 1667)

Background: Dr. Lorna Breen, an emergency physician who ran an emergency department in New York City, died by suicide in April 2020. Her death was preceded by weeks of caring for COVID-19 patients during the city’s initial case peak, including a period of time where she was recovering from the virus herself. Despite a self-awareness of her struggles and signaling her distress to friends and family, Dr. Breen feared she was “letting down” her colleagues and patients and that the treatment she eventually sought would end her promising career.

For most physicians and other clinicians, seeking treatment for mental health sparks legitimate fear of resultant loss of licensure (some state licensing boards continue to ask questions about clinicians’ mental health histories or past treatment), loss of income, training/career setbacks, and the residual impacts of persistent stigma associated with any mental health-related issue. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, such fears have deterred many healthcare professionals from seeking and/or accessing necessary mental health care, leaving many with no better option than to suffer in silence.

Issue: The COVID-19 virus generated an unprecedented modern public health crisis. Beyond the loss of life and physical health concerns this global pandemic has wrought, its sheer scope and overall scale have also taken a toll on the mental health and well-being of those who have been selflessly caring for patients. Even in “normal” times, physicians are believed to die by suicide more than the general population. As the nation begins to dissect the various effects of the COVID-19 crisis, an increasingly alarming residual impact relates to the lack of mental health infrastructure for health care providers and the significant stigma associated with seeking care. Ensuring clinicians can freely seek mental health treatment and services without fear of professional setback means such issues can be resolved, rather than hidden away and suffered through. Furthermore, optimal clinician mental health is essential to ensuring that patients have a strong and capable health care workforce to provide the care they need.

To address these issues, congressional lawmakers have introduced the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act which will:

- Establish grants for training health profession students, residents, or health care professionals in evidence-informed strategies to reduce and prevent suicide, burnout, mental health conditions, and substance use disorders;
- Seek to identify and disseminate evidence-informed best practices for reducing and preventing suicide and burnout among health care professionals;
- Establish a national evidence-based education and awareness campaign targeting health care professionals to encourage them to seek support and treatment;
- Establish grants for employee education, peer-support programming, and mental and behavioral health treatment with a focus on health care providers in current or former COVID-19 hotspots; and,
- Commissions a federal study into health care professional mental health and burnout and barriers to seeking appropriate care, with special examination of COVID-19’s impact.

Congressional Recommendations (House and Senate): To ensure patient access to medically necessary care can be maintained, it is vital that we work to preserve and protect the health of our medical workforce. ACR urges lawmakers to:

- Cosponsor S. 610/H.R. 1667; and
- Urge leadership to advance the bill(s) through the Committee process and allow for consideration on the House/Senate floor.