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Dear Governor Strickland,

On behalf of Ohioans in need of critical mental health and drug and alcohol addiction services, we were initially encouraged when we heard you say that we cannot eliminate essential safety net services to balance the budget. Yet you did. Either that or you do not consider behavioral health care an essential safety net service. **Make no mistake, Governor Strickland, under your proposal, people will die.**

Funding for behavioral health has historically been woefully inadequate in Ohio – in good economic times and in bad. State funding for community mental health and addiction recovery services were already below funding levels from ten years ago in the budget you introduced in February. The cuts you recommended in your framework last week will decimate Ohio's ability to provide treatment services to Ohioans with mental illness and addictive disorders.

The negative impact of insufficient access to behavioral healthcare during this economic downturn has already been grabbing headlines throughout Ohio. Our state has experienced 21 murder-suicide events from January through May of 2009 with 47 children and adults killed and 6 injured. In 2007, there were 10 such events in the same time period. Deaths due to overdoses, which now claim more lives than vehicle crash deaths, continue to climb. With appropriate access to treatment, lives can be saved.

It seems that policymakers have yet to grasp the sad fact that reducing funding to behavioral health services does not save taxpayer dollars. In fact, the opposite is true. People will still need access to behavioral healthcare - just like any other type of healthcare – whether it is funded or not. If they don't get it in the community, they'll get it elsewhere. The choice is simple. Ohio can invest an average \$7,400 per person on treatment for mental illness and \$1,600 for addiction treatment at the community level. Or we can spend \$25,000 per adult and \$79,000 per juvenile in our state correctional facilities, \$1,600 per day on avoidable emergency room visits, or \$18,000 a year for every child in foster care. Or we can add to the list of avoidable deaths.

People with serious behavioral health disorders, including children, the elderly, and veterans in need of help returning home already have to wait months just to see a treatment professional. In some areas, access to support services such as housing are non-existent. We cannot deny basic services such as medication, supportive housing, and treatment to these individuals and expect them to survive. If these are not essential safety net services for vulnerable Ohioans, we don't know what are.

Please, Governor Strickland, reconsider. And please, Members of the General Assembly do not accept for a minute that the Governor's framework protects the safety net. It absolutely does not. And for the rest of you who are reading this letter, please contact the Governor's Office (1- 614-466-3555) and your representatives in the General Assembly (1-800-282-0253) and urge them to preserve funding for community alcohol, drug addiction and mental health services.

Sincerely,

The Members of the Coalition for Healthy Communities

Mental Health Advocacy Coalition  
Mental Health America of Ohio  
Multiethnic Advocates for Cultural Competence  
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio (NAMI Ohio)  
National Association of Social Workers – Ohio Chapter (NASW – Ohio Chapter)  
Ohio Adult Care Facilities Association  
Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities  
Ohio Association of Residential Recovery Services  
Ohio Citizen Advocates for Chemical Dependency Prevention and Treatment  
Ohio Council of Behavioral Health and Family Services Providers  
Ohio Counseling Association  
Ohio Federation for Children's Mental Health  
Ohio Psychiatric Physicians Association  
Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation  
Universal Health Care Action Network of Ohio (UHCAN Ohio)