I have served in government for 30 years now, having gone from Mayor to Assemblymember and now to Member of Congress. But the role that I have most valued over my lifetime is that of psychologist. Because of my background, I know that there are many demands on today’s professional psychologists. There are medical, ethical, academic, and often business obligations. Psychologists face a vortex of responsibilities to patients, their families, and peers. But today, one of the most important roles that California psychologists can take is that of advocate.

Having been on both sides, I understand and depend upon the voices of experts in shaping and enacting good policy. As the quality and delivery of health care dominates our political discussions, psychologists are uniquely positioned to ensure an integrated model of care, which includes mental health care. That requires speaking up.

While serving in the California State Assembly I came to understand the challenges that psychologists face in being treated equally in the mental health system. Psychologists poured out their stories of frustrations to me. They told me about trying to release a patient early from an involuntary hold, and how they would have to wait for a psychiatrist to sign off on their decision. A psychologist in a prison mental facility talked about having to put the whole unit together and administer it only to have to wait for a psychiatrist to okay an early release of a patient in prison. It delayed the decision, yet they had a desperate need of beds.

It is because of these stories that I agreed to carry a bill to allow psychologists to release a patient from an involuntary hold. It faced incredible hurdles, particularly from psychiatrists who questioned the qualifications of psychologists to make such judgments. But we persevered and persuaded, and walked up and down the halls of the State Capitol to make convincing arguments. Finally, the bill passed. Today, California psychologists can release patients from an involuntary hold.

Now that I’m in Congress, I want to make sure psychologists are treated equally not just in California, but throughout our nation. Today, clinical psychologists deliver about 40% of Medicare outpatient mental health services. But they are the only doctoral-trained Medicare provider not included in the Medicare definition of a physician. Podiatrists, dentists, optometrists and chiropractors are included, but not psycholo-
When it comes to shaping policy and creating a better health care system, your stories matter, and your experience matters.

It is not right that the clinical psychologists who provide so many Medicare services are singled out as the ones who have to be supervised by psychiatrists. This must change. That is why I was an original cosponsor of a bill that would include psychologists in the Medicare physician definition. This change is crucial to increasing access to mental health services for Medicare patients at affordable costs.

I am also working to get more mental health resources to our schools. Currently, there are about 1,000 students for every school psychologist. The situation is even worse in low-income areas, where there can be an even greater need for mental health services. And yet when there are budget cuts, many times these employees are the first to be laid off.

This is why I introduced the Partnership for Achieving Student Success (PASS) Act in Congress. The PASS Act would create a competitive grant program to foster partnerships between low-income Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and schools that offer graduate programs in school counseling, school social work, school psychology, or psychology. The goal is to increase the number of graduates in the fields of psychology and social work who will go on to work in high-poverty school districts.

These are a few of the initiatives in Congress that would elevate our profession. But, Congress must hear from the psychologists at the front lines. Given that the CPA is the only organization that speaks for this profession in California, your voices are so important. Your work is critical to moving the issues of mental health and psychology forward. When it comes to shaping policy and creating a better health care system, your stories matter, and your experiences matter. Your advocacy can result in change, just as it did years ago when those psychologists told me about being second-class citizens regarding involuntary holds. I encourage you to be in touch with Members of Congress and State Legislators, and to participate in the political activities of the CPA. Together, we can protect the rights of psychologists while building a better health care system for all.

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