

For Immediate Release

December 9, 2022

National Assembly Passes Mental Health Bill, CSOs Encourage President to Assent

Abuja — Civil society groups called on President Buhari to assent to the National Mental Health Bill 2021 on or before Sunday, February 26, 2023. The demand was informed by Nigeria’s National Assembly passing the National Mental Health Bill 2021 and forwarding it to President Buhari for consideration and assent last week. The transmission occurred on November 28, 2022, according to a memorandum by the Clerk to the National Assembly (CNA), Ojo Olatunde Amos. The President now has 90 days to sign the legislation.

Mental health regulatory reforms have languished in Nigeria’s legislative chambers for almost two decades, with failed attempts at overhaul in 2003 and 2013. In 2019, mental health legislation was again advanced, with the Senate passing it for second reading in November of that year and holding public hearings in 2020. Harmonization of the Bill concluded between both legislative branches in June 2021. Since last year, mental health practitioners have been waiting for the Bill to be finalized and transmitted to the President.

“This legislation is a breakthrough as the country has never passed such a law since her Independence,” remarked Prof. Taiwo Obindo, President of the Association of Psychiatrists in Nigeria. “We thank the National Assembly for transmitting this Bill to the Presidency, and we appreciate the many legislators involved in making this happen, including the Chairs of the House and Senate Committees on Health, Hon. Dr. Tanko Sununu, and Senator Dr. Ibrahim Oloriegbe. Representatives Henry Nwawuba, Francis Waive, and Uchechukwu Nnam-Obi, along with others such as the Federal Ministry of Health, have also been instrumental. We hope they and their colleagues continue to support mental health advocacy and Executive assent.”

The proposed legislation will help replace the regional Lunacy Act of 1958, which practitioners condemn as outdated and inhumane.

Some provisions of the National Mental Health Bill 2021 include creating a Department of Mental Health Services in the Federal Ministry of Health and a Mental Health Fund. Establishing human rights protections for those with mental health conditions, such as banning discrimination in housing, employment, medical, and other social services. Additionally, expanding community-based coverage. This is an improvement from the old law as it guarantees that those receiving treatments have the right to participate in formulating their medical plans and cannot

have forced treatment, seclusion, and other methods of restraint in mental health facilities, without appropriate safeguards to protect their rights and those of others.

CSOs and associations working in mental health, neurological, and substance use areas have come together to promote the passage of the Bill and help advance the country's mental health field under the umbrella, Nigerian Mental Health, a network of mental health stakeholders, thought leaders, and organizations. Collectively, they have coordinated an Open Letter that over 30 mental health-focused organizations, including the four leading professional bodies in the field — the Association of Psychiatrists in Nigeria, the National Association of Clinical Psychologists, the Association of Medical Social Workers of Nigeria, and the Association of Psychiatric Nurses of Nigeria — signed to government leaders encouraging adoption of the National Mental Health Bill 2021.

“The mental health community in the country is speaking in a unified voice,” said Chime Asonye, Founder of Nigerian Mental Health, “requesting President Buhari sign this legislation and support those psychologically vulnerable and neurodivergent. Those passionate about this cause should help us promote awareness using the hashtag #PassNigerianMHB.”

Recommendations

1. We call on President Buhari to sign the National Mental Health Bill 2021 into law on or before the expiration of the 90 days timeline to further consolidate his achievements for persons living with disabilities, which include previously assenting to the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018 and inaugurating a National Commission for Persons with Disabilities, as his tenure comes to an end.
2. Enact other critical regulatory reforms for those with mental health conditions such as decriminalizing attempted suicide, which is illegal according to Nigeria's Criminal and Penal Codes and penalizes citizens with a one year jail term. The [World Health Organization](#) notes that criminalizing suicide discourages people from seeking help for their mental health, which would be counterproductive to effective dispensation of the National Mental Health Bill 2021.
3. The National Assembly should ensure gazetted copies of the National Mental Health Bill 2021 are available to citizens as soon as the Bill is signed into law.

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Signed,

1. Nigerian Mental Health
2. Association of Psychiatrists in Nigeria (APN)
3. Nigerian Association of Clinical Psychologists (NACP)
4. Association of Medical Social Workers of Nigeria (AMSWON)
5. Association of Psychiatric Nurses of Nigeria (APNON)
6. Mentally Aware Nigerian Initiative (MANI)

7. Joint National Association of Persons With Disabilities (JONAPWD)
8. Neem Foundation
9. Suicide Research & Prevention Initiative (SURPIN)
10. The Sunshine Series-Mind Wellness Ltd
11. Mental Health for Youth Initiative
12. Anti-Suicide and Depression Squad (ASADS)
13. The Mandate Health Empowerment Initiative (MHEI)
14. Mental Health with Ditty Foundation
15. Origami Society Nigeria
16. You're Not Alone Podcast
17. Siblings of Special Needs Foundation (SOSNEEDS) Nigeria
18. SBO Initiative
19. Psychebabble Foundation
20. Holistically NG
21. Nigerian Mental Health Practitioners USA Inc.
22. Nigerian-American Institute for Mental Health, Abuja, Nigeria.
23. Mental Health Pathway
24. Sanctuary of Wellness
25. Postpartum Support Network Africa
26. Friends Advocating For Mental Health Initiative
27. Africa's Mental Health Matters
28. MindCircle Initiative
29. The Art of Healing
30. Hay Foundation Africa
31. Olamma Cares Foundation
32. Talknaija.org
33. Celutions UK
34. Mindfortress
35. WeeTeens Wellness Initiative
36. Emma Njoku Foundation
37. Gabi Williams Alzheimer's Foundation
38. Encounter Jesus Apostolic-Missions International
39. Idimma Health Initiative
40. Stilt Ng