



Support Expansion of the Medicare telehealth Benefit

Issue

H.R. 2948 amends title XVIII (Medicare) of the Social Security Act to provide for an incremental expansion of telehealth coverage under the Medicare program.

Background

Current Medicare coverage of telehealth services is limited to rural counties and health shortage areas bordering metropolitan locations with the patient at a health facility (known as “originating sites”) such as physician offices, hospitals, skilled nursing facilities and rural health clinics.

Practitioners who can provide telehealth services include physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurse-midwives, clinical nurse specialists, clinical psychologists, clinical social workers and registered dietitians or nutrition professionals. Only a select number of medical procedures/services are covered such as consultations, counseling services, education, patient assessments, smoking cessation and transitional care management services. Remote patient monitoring and store-and-forward technologies (e.g., acquisition and storing of clinical information) are not covered under Medicare’s telehealth benefit.

Telehealth shows great promise for not only improving access to healthcare but also lowering the aggregate cost of healthcare through fewer ER visits and fewer hospitalizations. Encouraging and facilitating patient communication and interaction with their healthcare provider allows patients to be seen on a regular basis. Such interaction and communication is key to avoiding unnecessary trips to the ER.

Studies have also shown that through the appropriate use of remote monitoring equipment, unnecessary and expensive hospitalizations and/or ER visits can be avoided by identifying patients on the verge of an acute episodic event. These patients can be brought into the physician’s office for an office visit **before** the acute event occurs to assess the reason for a sudden change in the patient’s condition detected by the monitoring equipment. By intervening before the acute episodic event, the patient’s care is improved and an ER visit or hospitalization is avoided.

Discussion

H.R. 2948 proposes to expand Medicare’s coverage for telehealth and remote monitoring

services in three phases:

- 1) Expand current Medicare telehealth coverage to include respiratory therapists (RT) as qualified telehealth providers in addition to certified diabetes educators, physical therapists (PT), occupational therapists (OT), speech-language pathologists (SP) and audiologists. The benefit would also be expanded to include for respiratory care services, audiology services and outpatient therapy services including PT, OT and SP. Finally, the bill would add remote patient monitoring for patients with certain chronic conditions that include COPD.
- 2) Authorizes an individual's home as an authorized telehealth originating site based on a patient's chronic conditions/related chronic comorbidities when provided under chronic care management. Expands telehealth coverage to metropolitan counties with populations of 50,000-100,000.
- 3) Expands telehealth coverage to metropolitan counties with populations greater than 100,000.

H.R. 2948 is a bi-partisan bill introduced by Representatives Diane Black (R-TN); Mike Thompson (D-CA), Gregg Harper (R-MS) and Peter Welch (D-VT). Since its introduction 10 months ago, the bill has continue to enjoy growing bipartisan support with more than 40 Members signing on in support of this legislation.

The bill is currently pending before the House Energy and Commerce Committee and the House Ways and Means Committee

In addition to Allergy & Asthma Network, bill endorsed by:

American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology	American Telemedicine Association
AARP	American Heart Association
American Speech-Language Hearing Association	National Association for the Support of Long Term Care
Alliance for Home Dialysis	Remote Cardiac Services Providers Group
American Society of Nephrology	Biocom
National Rural Health Association	American Stroke Association
Telecommunications Industry Association	American Physical Therapy Association
Nursing Community Coalition (44 Nursing Groups)	Visiting Nurse Association of America
American Occupational Therapy Association	American Nursing Association
American Osteopathic Association	

RECOMMENDATION

House - Co-sponsor H.R. 2948 and encourage approval by the House Energy and Commerce Committee AND the House Ways and Means Committee.

Senate - Introduce companion legislation to H.R. 2948 in the Senate or include legislative language supporting expansion of telehealth with inclusion of respiratory care services as an amendment in a bill up for a vote in the Senate.