

# Medicare Mental Health Equity Coalition

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May 2, 2007

The Honorable John Dingell  
Chairman  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
2328 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Joe Barton  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
2109 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Dingell and Ranking Member Barton:

The undersigned organizations in the Medicare Mental Health Equity Coalition, representing patients, health professionals, health care systems and family members, urge you to eliminate the unfair provision in federal law imposing a 50 percent coinsurance rate for outpatient mental health services under Medicare instead of the usual 20 percent coinsurance for outpatient services. Our coalition supports enactment of legislation such as the "Seniors Access to Mental Health Act of 2007" (H.R. 1571), introduced by Representatives Tim Murphy (PA-18) and Grace Napolitano (CA-38), to reduce Medicare's outpatient mental health coinsurance to 20 percent over a period of six years. This would bring payments for mental health care in line with those required for all other Medicare Part B services.

The Medicare program was established to guarantee health care coverage for all older adults and people with disabilities. However, the 50 percent coinsurance for mental health services has proven to be a harmful barrier preventing many Medicare beneficiaries from accessing services they need. Since its enactment in 1965, we have learned that mental health disorders are highly prevalent in the elderly and disabled populations covered by the Medicare program. A landmark report by the Surgeon General on mental illness in 1999 found that 20 percent of the population aged 55 and older experience mental disorders that are not part of what should be considered as normal aging. In addition, a 2006 report by George Washington University found that 59 percent of Medicare beneficiaries with disabilities have a mental illness and 37 percent have a severe mental illness. Tragically, only about half of those experiencing a mental illness receive mental health treatment, due in large part to antiquated and discriminatory health coverage provisions, such as the 50 percent coinsurance rate under Medicare.

There is simply no reason for maintaining a discriminatory barrier to mental health care for America's seniors and individuals with disabilities, particularly since these populations present a high incidence of mental health concerns. The Medicare Mental Health Equity Coalition applauds the introduction of the Seniors Access to Mental Health Act of 2007 and encourages the Energy and Commerce Committee to support fairness in the Medicare program and advance legislation to eliminate the discriminatory 50 percent coinsurance at the earliest possible opportunity.

Thank you for your leadership in addressing mental health fairness for the nation's 44 million Medicare beneficiaries.

Sincerely,  
Medicare Mental Health Equity Coalition

American Association of Geriatric Psychiatry • American College of Physicians • American Psychiatric Association • American Psychological Association • Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness • Center for Medicare Advocacy, Inc • Medicare Rights Center • Mental Health America • National Alliance on Mental Illness • National Association of Social Workers • National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare • Psychologists for Long Term Care, Inc • Suicide Prevention Action Network USA

CC: The Honorable Frank Pallone; The Honorable Nathan Deal; The Honorable Tim Murphy