

Medicare Telehealth Improvement Act of 2008

Statement for the Record

Mr. President, today I rise with my colleague, Senator Stabenow, to introduce an important piece of legislation for Medicare beneficiaries living in rural areas. The Medicare Telehealth Improvement Act will ensure that rural beneficiaries have access to health care services by connecting remote areas to the services often only available in large urban centers.

Fifteen years ago, I co-founded the Congressional Steering Committee on Telemedicine and Health Care Informatics to bring more attention to this technology and its potential. I took an interest in this technology because in large, rural, medically underserved states like mine, telemedicine provides access to care that is simply unavailable otherwise. In many areas of North Dakota, routine check-ups with a specialist can require a 200 mile round trip journey. That's fine for a young person on a nice spring day. But it doesn't work for seniors in the middle of a North Dakota blizzard.

That's why in 1997, we fought to provide Medicare coverage of telemedicine services. But access to this benefit was strictly limited. For example, the telehealth service must be provided in a health professional shortage area or county not classified as a metropolitan statistical area. In addition, only consultations, office visits, individual psychotherapy and pharmacologic management are covered services. Moreover, reimbursement, which is the same as the current physician fee schedule amount, is limited to physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurse midwives, clinical nurse specialists, clinical psychologists, clinical social workers, and registered dietitians. Finally, only physician offices, hospitals, rural health clinics, and federally-qualified health centers are eligible to be originating sites and receive the "facility fee."

While this benefit has been helpful to seniors in rural areas, the adoption of telemedicine in the Medicare program has been slow. That's because we had to place too many restrictions on the benefit to control the estimated costs of covering these services. However, experience has shown that the use of telemedicine does not dramatically increase spending. In fact, it can actually save money.

That is why Senator Stabenow and I are introducing the Medicare Telehealth Improvement Act today. More seniors need to have access to this technology in all areas of health care, and our bill makes important changes in Medicare coverage.

First, the Medicare Telehealth Improvement Act would increase the number of originating sites eligible to receive the facility fee to include nursing homes, dialysis facilities and community mental health centers. Moreover, it would allow any other site that has telecommunications systems to be an originating site, but these sites would not be eligible for the facility fee.

Second, the bill allows more providers to participate. For a number of years, we have advocated to include physical therapists, occupational therapists, audiologists, and speech-language pathologists. This bill would make that change.

Finally, we would improve the Medicare process for updating the list of eligible services. Despite widespread support for the inclusion of new codes, CMS has not sufficiently updated the list of covered services in recent years. In response, our bill creates an advisory panel that would give recommendations on the addition or deletion of services.

Senator Stabenow and I have worked to garner support from a variety of stakeholders. In fact, the bill we are introducing today has the support of the American Telemedicine Association, the National Council on Community Behavioral Healthcare, the American Health Care Association, the American Health Information Management Association, the Center for Aging Services Technologies, the National Association for the Support of Long Term Care, and the National Center for Assisted Living. I ask unanimous consent that copies of their endorsement letters appear in the Record.

This bill is a meaningful step to further adoption of telehealth in the Medicare program. It will allow seniors to seek care in the comfort of their communities, instead of having to drive hundreds of miles. I urge my colleagues to support this initiative to ensure that every senior has access to the care they need.