

June 26, 2008

The Honorable Harry Reid
Office of the Majority Leader
S-221 Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Office of the Minority Leader
S-230 Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: CMHCs Strongly Support H.R. 6331

Dear Senator Reid and Senator McConnell:

On behalf of the 1,400 Community Mental Health Centers and other community-based behavioral health providers members of the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare, I am writing to express our strongest possible support for the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act (H.R. 6331).

While this legislation is primarily designed to prevent a Medicare fee reduction for physicians, it make a host of policy modifications that, taken together, change the face of the Medicare mental health benefit package. Most importantly, the legislation phases out the unfair 50% outpatient co-payment, which has operated to substantially reduce access to mental health care for Medicare beneficiaries with mental disorders. Indeed, this discriminatory provision – untouched since 1965 – burdens the most vulnerable, presents an enormous barrier to cost effective treatment, and contributes to the risk of psychiatric decompensation and re-hospitalization.

H.R. 6331 also contains other key Medicare changes, which enjoy broad bipartisan support. For example, the legislation authorizes Community Mental Health Centers to participate in the Medicare tele-health program. This no-cost provision will nonetheless expand access to mental health services in rural America and implement a key recommendation of President Bush's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health.

Finally, the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act provides an avenue for codifying a key Center for Medicare and Medicaid Service (CMS) guidance that protects patient access to anti-psychotic and anti-depressant medications in Part D Prescription Drug Plans. The existing administrative guideline has been an important life-line particularly for over 2 million dual eligibles with mental and cognitive disabilities. The National Council is extremely pleased that provision was included in the final version of H.R. 6331.

Thank you for considering our views that the Senate takes up this critically important measure for person with mental illnesses and addiction disorders.

Sincerely,



Linda Rosenberg, MSW, CSW
President and CEO