

SUMMARY

- *The Medicare program has relied on optometrists for physician services for 25 years; now Congress needs to assure that Medicaid beneficiaries have the same access to covered medical eye care.*
- *Optometrists provide the vast majority of primary eye care in Medicaid, but bureaucrats and insurers are imposing their own discriminatory restrictions on patient care and, ultimately, are driving up costs.*
- *Optometrists, the family eye doctors for most Americans, are integral for access on the frontline of health care delivery and are key members of multidisciplinary teams of health care professionals.*
- *The AOA supports the bi-partisan Hall-Schakowsky Optometric Equity in Medicaid Act (HR 1219) to avert a potential crisis in Medicaid access to eye care by ensuring Federal law fully recognizes the quality care provided by Optometrists. U.S. House members are asked to co-sponsor HR 1219.*

In 1986, Congress approved and President Reagan signed into law legislation formally recognizing Doctors of Optometry as physicians in Medicare (Public Law 99-509). As a result, for 25 years, America's seniors have been able to choose their local optometrist for covered primary eye care.

Unfortunately, in Medicaid, for too long there has been restricted access and few, if any, choices when it comes to essential eye health. Although optometrists have long provided the bulk – recent estimates indicate up to 81% -- of primary eye health and vision care through Medicaid, the program too often fails to fully recognize optometrists to offer covered medical services they are trained, licensed and ready, willing and able to provide. **In addition to restricting access to care, existing law allows bureaucrats and, increasingly, managed care companies to make important medical decisions for patients who need eye care.** For working men and women, this type of outdated provider discrimination can result in delayed or even denied care for an eye disease, like glaucoma, a serious infection, a foreign body in the eye, an undiagnosed vision disorder or even diabetes, the leading cause of acquired blindness for adults. In addition, taxpayers ultimately pay even higher costs when much-needed access to primary care is restricted.

Reps. Ralph Hall (R-TX) and Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) have worked with all eye doctors – optometrists and ophthalmologists – on a bi-partisan, pro-competitive approach to getting expanded access to quality, essential eye care to the communities where it's most needed. The **Hall-Schakowsky Optometric Equity in Medicaid Act (HR 1219)** seeks to avert a potential crisis in access to primary eye care for Medicaid patients by amending the Federal Medicaid statute to fully recognize optometrists to provide “medical and other health services to the extent those services may be performed under state law.” The bill would not change the scope of practice of any health care professional nor supersede the longstanding authority of states to determine scope of practice. The bill does not authorize any new spending or add any new covered benefit; it merely gives patients important choice and access to medical eye care already covered by Medicaid.

Thanks to President Reagan and Congress, patient choice and expanded access to quality eye and vision care have been a key strength of Medicare for 25 years. HR 1219 would bring the same proven approach to Medicaid by ensuring that optometrists, who are on the frontline of care in communities across the country, are able to deliver the eye health care their patients need.

SUPPORT OPTOMETRIC EQUITY IN MEDICAID ACT (HR 1219):
QUALITY CARE, HEALTHY COMPETITION AND PATIENT CHOICE

Doctors of Optometry are the nation's frontline providers of eye and vision care, and the most accessible providers of vision and medical eye care services to Medicaid patients. Optometrists are eye care professionals who diagnose, treat and manage diseases, injuries and disorders of the eye, surrounding tissues and visual system. There are more than 50,000 optometrists providing care for tens of millions of patients across the country, and in more than 3,500 communities optometrists are the only eye doctors. In addition to providing eye and vision care as part of multidisciplinary teams, optometrists play a major role in a patient's overall health and well-being by detecting and helping prevent complications of systemic diseases such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease, neurologic disease and diabetes, the leading cause of acquired blindness.

SUPPORT EXPANDED ACCESS TO EYE CARE WHERE IT'S NEEDED. MEMBERS OF CONGRESS ARE URGED TO CO-SPONSOR the HALL-SCHAKOWSKY OPTOMETRIC EQUITY IN MEDICAID ACT (HR 1219).

For more information, please contact Alicia Kerry Jones (akjones@aoa.org) of the AOA Washington Office at 1-800-365-2219 or Rep. Ralph Hall (Attn: Kyle Oliver) at 5-6673.

Doctors of Optometry are trained to recognize critical health issues while examining a patient's eyes:

- *A man in his 20s thought he needed eyeglasses because he had been having severe headaches and blurred vision. It turned out he had critically high blood pressure. "He didn't need glasses; he needed to be hospitalized," said Dr. Lee. "He was in kidney failure and was on dialysis within 2 days."*
- *A farmer came in to have a piece of metal removed from his eye. While removing the object, the doctor recognized he had glaucoma. "This early detection may have saved his sight," said Dr. Burton.*
- *While performing an eye health exam, an optometrist recognized a condition that needed urgent evaluation and treatment by a neurologist on a priority basis. "She was diagnosed one week later with a brain tumor," said Dr. Lewis. "Due to the timely referral, it was successfully treated."*
- *At a health fair in conjunction with the 2008 annual meeting of a leading national veterans' organization, the group's past national commander complains to Dr. Giedd of blurred vision. The commander was examined and the preliminary diagnosis was a detached retina. The patient was referred for further testing and, within 48 hours, his sight was saved following successful surgery.*

The members of the American Optometric Association – America's Family Eye Doctors – are the nation's frontline providers of eye and vision care. Doctors of Optometry serve patients, including America's seniors, school-aged children, veterans and military service personnel, in about 6,500 communities across the country.

March 29, 2011

Cosponsor the Optometric Equity in Medicaid Act (HR 1219)

Dear Colleague,

We are writing to invite you to become a cosponsor of H.R. 1219, the Optometric Equity in Medicaid Act, a bipartisan bill seeking to ensure that school-aged children and working adults across the country have access to an eye doctor when they need one. We worked with all eye doctors -- Optometrists and Ophthalmologists -- on this pro-competitive approach to getting expanded access to quality, essential eye care to the communities where it is most needed. Although eye care is recognized as an essential component of primary health care, some states put the health of Medicaid and CHIP beneficiaries at risk by limiting - or completely eliminating - access to critical eye care to certain providers.

In 1986, Congress approved and President Reagan signed into law legislation formally recognizing Doctors of Optometry as physicians in Medicare (Public Law 99-509). As a result, for the last 25 years, senior and disabled Americans are able to receive timely and appropriate care from their eye doctor. Unfortunately, in Medicaid, for too long there has been restricted access and few, if any, choices when it comes to essential eye health. Although Optometrists have long provided the bulk of primary eye health and vision care through Medicaid, the program too often fails to fully recognize Optometrists to offer covered medical services they are trained, licensed and ready, willing and able to provide.

In addition to restricting access to care, the existing law allows bureaucrats and, increasingly, managed care companies to make important medical decisions for patients who need eye care. This type of outdated provider discrimination can result in delayed or even denied care for an eye disease, like glaucoma, an infection, a foreign body in the eye, an undiagnosed vision disorder or even diabetes, the leading cause of acquired blindness.

Our bill seeks to avert a potential crisis in access to primary eye care for Medicaid patients by amending the Federal Medicaid statute to fully recognize Optometrists to provide "medical and other health services to the extent those services may be performed under state law." The bill would not change the scope of practice of any health care professional nor supersede the longstanding authority of states to determine scope of practice. Also, the bill does not authorize any new spending nor add any new covered benefit; it merely gives patients important choice and access to medical eye care already covered by Medicaid.

Please consider cosponsoring H.R. 1219 to ensure access to eye care for Medicaid and CHIP patients. Doctors of Optometry are the nation's frontline providers of eye and vision care, treating Americans of all ages, providing care for tens of millions of patients across the country, and in more than 3,500 communities optometrists are the only eye doctors.

Please contact Kyle Oliver of my staff at 5-6673 or Jonathan Rucks at 5-2111 in Rep. Schakowsky's office if you have questions or if you like to join as a cosponsor of this bill.

Sincerely,

Ralph Hall
Member of Congress

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

Original Cosponsors of HR 1219: Reps. Lee Terry (NE), Ed Whitfield (KY), John Barrow (GA)

54 Co-Sponsors of 111th Congress Legislation Similar to HR 1219*

Alabama

Bright (D)
Rogers, M. (R)

Alaska

Young (R)

Arkansas

Boozman (R)

Arizona

Giffords (D)
Pastor (D)

California

Chu (D)
Farr (D)
Filner (D)
Garamendi (D)
Lee (D)
Lofgren (D)
Napolitano (D)
Sanchez, Loretta (D)
Speier (D)

Colorado

Markey (D)
Perlmutter (D)
Salazar (D)

Georgia

Barrow (D)

Illinois

Halvorson (D)
Hare (D)

Schakowsky (D)

Iowa

Braley (D)
Latham (R)

Kansas

Moran (R)

Kentucky

Chandler (D)
Guthrie (R)
Rogers (R)

Maine

Michaud (D)

Maryland

Kratovil (D)

Michigan

Kildee (D)
Miller (R)
Peters (D)
Schauer (D)

Minnesota

Peterson (D)

Mississippi

Childers (D)

Nebraska

Smith (R)
Terry (R)

New Jersey

Andrews (D)
LoBiondo (R)
Sires (D)

New York

Arcuri (D)
Engel (D)
Hall, J. (D)
Maffei (D)
Owens (D)
Tonko (D)

Ohio

Kilroy (D)
Ryan (D)
Schmidt (R)

Oklahoma

Boren (D)

Tennessee

Cohen (D)

Texas

Granger (R)
Hall, R. (R)

CO-SPONSOR HR 1219

* HR 2697 + HR 6290 – 111th Congress