
Plan to Join Us!! VOR 2006 Annual Meeting and Washington Initiative. See -
<http://www.vor.net/VORAnnualMeeting2007.htm> for complete details, including a registration form.

VOR is the only national organization advocating for a full range of residential and support options for people with mental retardation, including Medicaid-certified Intermediate Care Facilities for the Mentally Retarded (ICFs/MR) and home and community-based care. VOR supports choice.

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VOR Weekly E-Mail Update February 23, 2007

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Coming Up: Due to VOR travel, there will be no update Friday, March 2, 2007.

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1. Medicaid Enrollment in all 50 States

"Medicaid Enrollment in 50 States" provides data on Medicaid enrollment by state, including information updated through June 2005.

See -- <http://ga3.org/ct/D1AHWJs1Ez9s/>

2. Bipartisan Group of Senators Wants To Work With Bush on Healthcare Reform

BNA Volume 12 Number 31 Thursday, February 15, 2007 A bipartisan group of senators led by Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) has asked President Bush to work with them to "fix the nation's healthcare system," and has proposed some principles for reform.

The White House reacted favorably to a Feb. 13 letter to Bush from the group. A White House spokesman told BNA Feb. 14 that "we're very positive on this, and see it as a sincere effort to try to find some common ground."

In their letter, the senators told Bush that they would "like to work with you and your Administration to pass legislation in this Congress" embodying six elements:

* ensuring that all Americans would have affordable, quality, private health coverage, while protecting current government programs;

- * modernizing federal tax rules for health coverage to avoid the tendency in the current rules to "favor the most affluent, while promoting inefficiency";
- * creating more opportunities and incentives for states to design their own health solutions;
- * a switch in emphasis from the current focus on sick care to the creation of "a culture of wellness through prevention strategies";
- * encouraging more cost-effective chronic and compassionate end-of-life care; and
- * improving access to information on price and quality of health services.

In addition to Wyden, the group consists of Sens. Robert Bennett (R-Utah), Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.), Kent Conrad (D-N.D.), Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), Jim DeMint (R-S.C.), Herb Kohl (D-Wis.), Trent Lott (R-Miss.), Ken Salazar (D-Colo.), and John Thune (R-S.D.).

White House Interested

White House spokesman Tony Fratto told BNA that, while the senators were not endorsing Bush's own proposals for healthcare reform, "they certainly are saying, 'You've put some interesting ideas on the table, some of which we agree with, and we have some ideas. We'd like to come to the table and talk about ways we can work together to try to find something that we both can agree to.'... It's a good sign, especially in this environment. "

Of the six elements mentioned in the letter, Fratto said, the comments on tax were particularly interesting. "The recognition of the unfairness of the tax code, which the president laid out, is something that we feel very strongly about," he said.

In their letter, the senators stressed the urgency of the issue. "Further delay is unacceptable as costs continue to skyrocket, our population ages, and chronic illness increases," the group said. "In addition, our businesses are at a severe disadvantage when their competitors in the global market get healthcare for 'free.'"

The senators said they did not share the view of some that the Senate was too divided to pass comprehensive healthcare legislation. "We disagree with those who believe that this issue should not come up until after the next presidential election," they said. "We disagree with those who want to wait when the American people are saying, loud and clear, 'We want to fix healthcare now.'"

Text of the letter is at

http://wyden.senate.gov/media/2007/02132007_Health_Care_Letter.htm

3. Coalition Launches Ads Opposing Medicare, Medicaid Cuts

Congressional Quarterly February 8, 2007

A coalition of businesses, hospitals and hospital groups has launched a million-dollar advertising campaign to urge Congress to reject cuts to Medicare and Medicaid in the president's fiscal 2008 budget proposal.

The group, the Coalition to Protect America's Health Care, kicked off the campaign Wednesday with print ads highlighting hospitals' role in caring for America's most vulnerable patients. The campaign also will include television and radio ads, to debut Feb. 12.

In a statement, the group said, "The nation's hospitals provide an important safety net for much-needed health care upon which these citizens depend, and the administration's fiscal year '08 budget proposal could put at risk hospitals' ability to provide these important health care services to all patients."

The president's proposal, released Monday, would slice a net \$95.9 billion from entitlement spending over the next five years, and \$309 billion over 10 years. Medicare savings alone account for \$66 billion over five years and \$252.4 billion over a decade. Much of the proposed savings would come from cuts in payments to hospitals and other providers, but some would come from charging higher monthly premiums to wealthier beneficiaries.

4. President's FY08 Budget Proposal - CCD Media Statement

Summary: The following is the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities statement in response to the President's Fiscal Year 2008 Budget Proposal, submitted recently to Congress. Congress will consider the President's proposal, but is in no way bound by the proposal. The Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities is a NONPARTISAN coalition of over 100 national consumer, provider, and advocacy organizations. The following statement is highly critical of the President's budget proposal based on the issues, not any particular partisan ideology. The article following this CCD statement provides some information on the Administration's response to critics of the President's budget proposal.

February 6, 2007 President's Budget Reveals Broken Promises and Wrong Priorities Statement of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities on the President's FY08 Budget Proposal

At the 16th Anniversary of the Signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act last July, President Bush stated his commitment to ensuring that the fundamental promises of our democracy are accessible to all our citizens.

The Administration's fiscal year 2008 budget breaks this promise of full citizenship. President Bush's budget and tax policy, emphasizing wealth over opportunity, simply fails to match his rhetoric.

It is obvious from the abysmal FY 2008 budget request that this Administration indeed does plan to finance an unpopular war and tax cuts as well as achieve a balanced federal budget on the backs of people with disabilities, said Marty Ford, Chair of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities.

The services and supports targeted by the Bush Administration enable millions of Americans with disabilities to learn, work, pay taxes, live in their communities, and make significant contributions to our society.

Among the key disability related federal programs targeted for elimination, cutbacks, or freezes in funding include:

Broken Promise: Medicaid and Medicare

During the Presidents State of the Union Address, he stated that "When it comes to health care, government has an obligation to care for the elderly, the disabled and poor children." However, the Presidents budget includes legislative proposals that would cut key entitlement programs by \$101.5 billion over the next five years \$75.8 billion in Medicare and \$25.7 billion in Medicaid. Some of these cuts, \$10.2 billion in Medicare and \$12.7 billion in Medicaid, would be achieved through administrative actions by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) while the remaining cuts would need to be enacted by Congress.

Broken Promise: Childrens Health

Although nearly six million low-income children remain uninsured today, the budget fails to provide sufficient funds for the State Childrens Health Insurance Program simply to maintain current levels of coverage and represents a step backward from the goal of covering all low-income children. In addition, small health prevention programs that provide a big impact such as the traumatic brain injury and childrens newborn hearing screening program are zeroed out.

Broken Promise: Human Services

During the signing of the Combating Autism Act, President Bush stated that "for the millions of Americans whose lives are affected by autism, today is a day of hope. The Combating Autism Act of 2006 will increase public awareness about this disorder and provide enhanced federal support for autism research and treatment. By creating a national education program for doctors and the public about autism, this legislation will help more people recognize the symptoms of autism. This will lead to early identification and intervention, which is critical for children with autism. However, the Presidents budget provides no funding for this new law.

Broken Promise: Employment

After promising to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities as part of his New Freedom Initiative, the President proposed for the seventh year in a row to eliminate the supported employment program that successfully assists people with significant disabilities to work in the community and be productive tax-paying citizens. For the first time since the Congress added a mandatory increase to the Vocational Rehabilitation State Grant program based on the Consumer Price Index more than two decades ago, this Administration even failed to add the CPI increase to its budget request. Total VR Act funding is cut by \$54 million while millions of Americans with disabilities remain unemployed. In addition, the President

again proposes to cut the Assistive Technology program that assists individuals with disabilities to be successful and included in classrooms and at work by over \$4 million.

Broken Promise: Education

The President seeks to level fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) State Grant, the Preschool Grant and the Part C Early Intervention programs and cut the IDEA National Activities programs by \$64 million. The IDEA State Grant request would actually decrease the per pupil federal share of funding for students with disabilities below 17%, well below the authorized amount of 40%. That share has dropped about 3% in the last several years. The special education teacher preparation program is frozen at a critical time when school systems grow desperate to hire highly qualified teachers to implement the requirements of No Child Left Behind. A large proportion of special education students are taught every day by unqualified teachers, let alone those who are highly qualified.

Broken Promise: Housing

For the third consecutive year, the Presidents budget proposes to slash the Section 811 Supportive Housing Program for Persons with Disabilities, a 46% cut. Most of the \$113 million cut would come from the programs capital advance component - the only federal program that produces affordable and accessible housing for low-income persons with significant disabilities.

Broken Promise: Research

For the National Institutes of Health, the Administration proposes \$28.6 billion for FY 2008, which is \$310 million less than the funding level in the final FY 2007 Joint Funding resolution passed by the House last week. In addition, the Administration proposes to increase the Global AIDS Transfer out of NIH by \$201 million, effectively cutting the agencys budget by \$511 million in FY 2008 and reducing it to its FY 2005 funding level.

The President's fiscal year 2006 budget reveals broken promises and wrong priorities. The Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities urges the U.S. Congress to reject the Administration's budget cuts and to reaffirm the promise of full citizenship for America's citizens with disabilities.

5. Acting CMS Administrator Defends Funding In Bush Budget Lawmakers Voice Concerns

BNA Volume 12 Number 30 Wednesday, February 14, 2007 Acting Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Administrator Leslie V. Norwalk Feb. 13 defended the president's fiscal year 2008 budget proposal to trim Medicare and Medicaid funding by about \$101 billion over five years, including plans to reduce Medicare provider spending.

In testimony to the House Ways and Means Health Subcommittee, Norwalk highlighted what she characterized as positive trends in the Medicare Advantage and Part D prescription drug programs.

However, subcommittee Chairman Pete Stark (D-Calif.) said he was "disappointed with the President's budget." He added, "We're going to have to set aside this budget" and come up with something "from scratch."

In her testimony, Norwalk said, "Experience with Medicare Part D to date demonstrates the great potential of market reforms to save Medicare dollars, while also promoting beneficiary choice and satisfaction."

In addition, beneficiaries enrolled in Medicare managed care plans (Medicare Advantage) "have access to integrated health and prescription drug benefits, often with lower premiums and cost-sharing than under fee-for-service Medicare," she said.

Committee Members Voice Skepticism

Along with Stark, many Democrats on the subcommittee expressed skepticism at Norwalk's claims, questioning the value of higher payments that Medicare managed care plans often receive.

Republican members of the subcommittee also voiced their concerns with the president's fiscal 2008 budget proposal, asking why the administration chose not to address problems in Medicare's physician payment formula.

The proposal leaves overpayments in place for private plans, while cutting other parts of the program, Stark said. The budget would require beneficiaries to pay higher Part B premiums and would raise rates for many higher-income beneficiaries, he said.

The proposal also provides more than \$3 billion for health savings accounts, which primarily benefit upper-income families, while shortchanging the State Children's Health Insurance Program by \$12 billion, he said.

In the past, Stark said, both the president and Congress worked to ensure that Medicare remained a guaranteed retirement benefit for all of America's seniors. This latest budget proposal "is designed to convert Medicare from a program to cover all seniors to one which covers only those who have no other option."

Managed Care

Stark also highlighted the president's failure to reduce spending for Medicare Advantage programs, calling Medicare managed care plans "the one group that stands out as not having contributed anything" to the budget cuts.

"Medicare Advantage plans have been left out of the loop, and I don't want them to feel overlooked," he quipped.

Norwalk said managed care plans would be impacted under the president's budget because Medicare Advantage program benchmarks would be affected by any changes to Medicare Part A and B programs.

Medicare managed care plans also provide additional benefits to beneficiaries, she added. For example, more than 85 percent of Medicare Advantage beneficiaries have access to zero premium plans, she said. On average, beneficiaries in Medicare managed care plans save \$86 per month, she added.

Minorities and low-income beneficiaries receive the greatest benefit from Medicare Advantage plans, Norwalk said. As a percentage, more minorities and low-income populations are enrolled in Medicare Advantage plans than in traditional fee-for-service plans, she said.

Physician Payments

The president's budget did not discuss the sustainable growth rate formula. For physicians, the SGR formula has led to cuts in Medicare reimbursements that will continue in 2008 and beyond.

The lack of discussion prompted questions from Democrats and Republicans alike.

Rep. Earl Pomeroy (D-N.D.) said the president provided a "goose egg" in terms of providing a multi-year fix to the SGR formula.

Subcommittee ranking member Dave Camp (R-Mich.) said the administration could have taken a number of steps to help improve the physician payment system, such as removing drug payments from the SGR formula.

Norwalk said the budget does recognize that the SGR formula "is a problem." She said CMS would like to become a "more active purchaser" of health care services to better reward efficient behavior among physicians, something the current SGR formula does not do.

Tamie Hopp

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TO REFER SOMEONE TO VOR: Use the form below, including the additional sections for referrals.

Mail the completed form (if joining or contributing) with payment to: Voice of the Retarded
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credit card payments) vor@compuserve.com (for referrals or credit card payments)

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FOR REFERRALS: You may use my name in any correspondence with this individual.

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