

Congressional Update Dec. 12, 2011

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At this writing Congress has just a few days left until the end of the year and many critical decisions remain to meet year-end deadlines set in law. Divided all year on issues large and small, legislators are scurrying to address key year-end measures on topics such as Medicare physician payments, expiring tax breaks, agency funding bills and termination of unemployment insurance benefits.

Medicare Provider Status

In spite of very aggressive efforts by AMHCA and its coalition partners, clinical mental health counselors and marriage and family therapist Medicare provider status legislation was not included in critical year-end Medicare legislation introduced this week by GOP House leaders. The so-called Medicare physician-fee bill addresses a 27 percent physician fee cut set in statute, but the bill omits all Medicare modernization provisions. The GOP bill restores physician payments for two-years at a cost \$39 billion, but offsets to address the House bill costs are very controversial and said to be unacceptable to the Democrat-controlled Senate. In spite of the expiring physician fee provision in current law, it is highly uncertain how Congress will reach agreement on Medicare fees this year. AMHCA and its coalition partners will continue to press our provider status legislation, hoping to build momentum for inclusion in revised Medicare legislation.

Veteran Mental Health Services

AMHCA and its coalition partners continue to meet with various offices of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to encourage hiring more clinical mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists. High profile press criticism of VA mental health services this past month has increased congressional concerns about the adequacy of mental health services for returning vets. Last week Veterans Affairs Committees in both the House and Senate held hearings on the topic, greatly criticizing the VA for what they viewed as a very inadequate response to the needs of returning vets. AMHCA's coalition hopes that congressional criticism will leverage greater VA response to our hiring concerns.

Agency Funding

House and Senate negotiators are making progress on once substantial differences over a year-end bill funding many key government agencies, including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). This year's agency limits were set by the August budget agreement, but budget hawks were reluctant to accept appropriations caps they considered too generous, thus delaying completion of the legislation. Congressional leaders now report confidence that a deal will be reached within a few days, enabling agencies to operate past a December 16 deadline. Due to the late time-frame, the catch-all appropriations bill could be added onto unrelated measures like tax and unemployment extensions, thus further complicating passage by year end.

Acting CMHS Director Named

SAMHSA Administrator Pamela S. Hyde announced a leadership shuffle of key mental health positions effective December 21. After eight years as Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS) Director, Kathryn Power will assume a new position as SAMHSA Administrator, Region 1 (New England). Shifting Power's position enables Paolo del Vecchio to become Acting Director of CMHS. Del Vecchio currently serves as CMHS Associate Director for Consumer Affairs and has worked previously for Philadelphia's Office of Mental Health. Selection of a permanent CMHS Director is planned as an open process.