



Supporting Quality Health Care Services at Home

News Release

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Consumer and Provider Groups Oppose Provision in Children's Bill that Would Reduce Access to Power Wheelchairs for Seniors and Americans with Disabilities

ARLINGTON, VA, August 30, 2007 ---- While promoting the laudable goal of trying to strengthen healthcare for our nation's children, the U.S. House of Representatives has included a little-known provision that weakens homecare for Medicare beneficiaries. As the House version of the Children's Health and Medicare Protection (CHAMP) Act currently stands, the bill would penalize both homecare patients and providers by eliminating Medicare beneficiaries' current ability to choose to purchase power wheelchairs.

The American Association for Homecare, the American Association of People with Disabilities, The ALS Association (Lou Gehrig's disease), Easter Seals, the National Council on Independent Living, the National Spinal Cord Injury Association, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the United Spinal Association represent several of the advocacy organizations that oppose this change to the power wheelchair policy.

Most Medicare beneficiaries who require power wheelchairs live with long-term debilitating conditions that are not short-term in nature and, with few exceptions, use a power wheelchair for the remainder of their lives. Once prescribed a power wheelchair, virtually all of those Medicare beneficiaries elect to purchase within the first month.

Proposed changes to Medicare will eliminate a patient's first-month purchase option, forcing the beneficiary to rent the power wheelchair for 13 months before ownership transfers to the patient. Elimination of this option will reduce access for beneficiaries who live with long-term conditions such as multiple sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease, and spinal cord injuries. A 'rental-only' policy will create severe access problems for patients because providers will be unable to cover the significant up-front costs needed for the power wheelchair and will be unable to produce the needed specialized items and related services such as the custom accessories including custom backs, seats, and tilt/recline systems required for power wheelchairs.

Analysis by the American Association for Homecare, which represents providers of home medical equipment and therapies, has shown that eliminating the first-month purchase option would result in the Medicare program paying five percent *more* for power wheelchairs than Medicare currently pays.

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Medicare's rental program rents equipment for 13 months through durable medical equipment (DME) companies that are responsible for maintenance and service during this rental period. Medicare requires that providers take away wheelchairs from patients whenever they enter a hospital or nursing home because Medicare coverage for equipment ceases. Hospitalizations are not uncommon for power wheelchair users, including long rehab stays. The hospital or nursing home becomes responsible for providing such services, leading to patients having a caregiver push them in a manual wheelchair, or being forced to remain in bed.

This policy runs counter to the President's New Freedom Initiative and widespread support from across the public and private sectors for access to services and supports to maximize function and independence. In fact, in addition to driving up cost, this provision may well lead to violation of the civil rights of individuals with disabilities to live in the most integrated setting appropriate, since successful community living is often dependent on the availability of assistive technology that would be denied under this provision, said Marcie Roth, Executive Director and CEO of the National Spinal Cord Injury Association.

"Power wheelchairs are expensive yet necessary to allow patients to live independent lives outside of nursing homes and hospitals. Power wheelchair reimbursement has suffered numerous reductions, which already threatens to erode patient access and quality of care," stated Tyler J. Wilson, President and CEO of the American Association for Homecare. "If Congress enacts this change, beneficiaries are more likely to require more skilled care rather than being able to stay at home with their family and loved ones."

The American Association for Homecare and advocacy groups believe that Medicare beneficiaries should be able to retain the option of purchasing power wheelchairs in the first month. Congress must eliminate the provision (608) from the Children's Health and Medicare Protection Act of 2007 (H.R. 3162) in order to preserve access to power wheelchairs, thereby preserving independence and self-determination for people with disabilities.

The American Association for Homecare represents providers and manufacturers of durable medical equipment. Association members serve the medical needs of millions of Americans who require oxygen equipment and therapy, mobility assistive technologies, medical supplies, inhalation drug therapy, home infusion, and other home medical equipment, therapies, services, and supplies. Membership includes providers of all sizes that operate approximately 3,000 locations in all 50 states. See www.aahomecare.org.