Supporting Occupational Therapy in Medicare Home Health

Medicare Home Health Flexibility Act S.977

Talking Points

Occupational therapy qualifies patients for home health therapy services on a “continuing need basis.” This means that occupational therapy alone will not qualify someone for home health services. However, a person can receive OT if they also receive physical therapy (PT), speech, or nursing. If the qualifying service (such as PT or speech) discharges a patient, that person can continue to receive occupational therapy only (i.e., on a continuing need basis).

Unlike physical therapy and speech language pathology services, occupational therapists are not permitted under Medicare to initiate home health cases (i.e., be the first person in the door). Due to regulations, occupational therapists cannot conduct the required initial assessment and complete the first comprehensive assessment to develop the plan of care, even when listed alongside other qualifying services.

The Medicare Home Health Flexibility Act (S. 977) would specifically allow occupational therapists to open home health therapy cases and conduct the required comprehensive assessments. This bill is bipartisan and was introduced by Senator Cardin (D-MD) and Senator Heller (R-NV). We hope to have a bill introduced in the House by early September.

It was given a ZERO score by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO)—meaning, it does not cost anything.

Occupational therapists are qualified to perform the initial and first comprehensive rehabilitation assessments based on their unique training and perspective, which focus on a person’s functional capabilities. Under current regulations, OTs can conduct comprehensive assessments, but only when they are the last remaining service being provided (“continuing need basis”).

Not allowing occupational therapists to open health therapy cases, causes unneeded barriers to providing patients with effective, timely, and appropriate therapy services. In areas where access to physical therapists or speech language pathologists is limited, the inability of occupational therapists to perform the required initiating assessments can lead to delays in beneficiaries receiving home health therapy services, and possible increased costs to Medicare.

This change in policy would apply to rehabilitation-only cases and be limited to instances in which skilled nursing is not identified by the ordering physician; nurses conduct the initial assessment whenever they are involved in a home health case and this bill does not change that policy.

Your Ask:

Please cosponsor The Medicare Home Health Flexibility Act (S.977 to be introduced in the House)

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