



Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee

PO BOX 201706
Helena, MT 59620-1706
(406) 444-3064
FAX (406) 444-3036

60th Montana Legislature

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RICK LAIBLE
TERRY MURPHY
DAN WEINBERG

HOUSE MEMBERS

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March 31, 2008

The Honorable Max Baucus
United States Senate
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510-2602

Dear Senator Baucus,

I am writing on behalf of the Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee to thank you for your efforts to avert the proposed 10% cut in Medicare payments to physicians and to support your efforts to find a solution that will allow Medicare reimbursements to increase, particularly for primary care physicians.

Our legislative committee is concerned that a reduction in Medicare payments to physicians would have severe consequences for Medicare beneficiaries and, potentially, for other Montanans. The proposed reduction would almost certainly force physicians to reconsider their participation in Medicare and possibly limit the number of Medicare patients they accept – a step that would have serious repercussions in Montana. According to the Department of Public Health and Human Services, one-fifth to one-fourth of the residents of our rural, eastern counties are already 65 years of age or older and an estimated 14% of our population will reach or exceed that age by 2011.

The rate reduction also may aggravate the problems that many Montanans – not just Medicare patients – already have in accessing health care, particularly the important diagnostic and preventive care provided by primary care physicians. These physicians are often the gateway for patients to receive the more specialized care they need for serious health problems. Primary care physicians are already struggling in Montana. The Mountain Pacific Quality Health Foundation reports that just 202 primary care practices exist in the state, or an average of less than four practices per county. Most of our rural areas are well below that average.

The Children and Families Committee also supports the idea of an 18-month, rather than six-month, extension of the Medicare rate fix. This longer-term solution would provide physicians with more stability and certainty in planning for the business side of their practices.

Again, our bipartisan committee wants to emphasize that we unanimously oppose the planned 10% reduction in physician reimbursements, and we want to thank you for your efforts on an issue that is important to both physicians and patients.

Sincerely,

Edith Clark
Presiding Officer

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