

October 2024

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Chairwoman
Energy and Commerce Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Frank Pallone
Ranking Member
Energy and Commerce Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jason Smith
Chairman
Ways and Means Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Richard Neal
Ranking Member
Ways and Means Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairs McMorris Rodgers and Smith, Ranking Members Pallone and Neal,

As Congress looks toward an end-of-year strategy for funding the government and fulfilling important health care priorities, the undersigned organizations strongly encourage lawmakers to include the *Medicare Audiology Access Improvement Act* (MAAIA, H.R. 6445) in any year-end legislative package before the 118th Congress adjourns. This bipartisan legislation is essential for expanding access to hearing and balance health care by addressing outdated Medicare laws and regulations that currently impede the ability of older adults to receive timely, effective treatment for auditory and vestibular disorders.

Hearing loss affects nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population – 48 million Americans – and is the third most common chronic disorder among those aged 65 and older, behind only arthritis and high blood pressure. Nearly half of Americans over age 75 suffer from hearing loss. Left untreated, hearing loss increases the risks of loneliness, cognitive decline, falls, and other health complications, all contributing to higher Medicare expenditures. Audiologists play a critical role in diagnosing and treating these issues, enabling older adults to maintain their quality of life and independence while reducing overall healthcare costs.

Unfortunately, current Medicare policy has not kept pace with changes in health care delivery models for diagnosing and treating hearing and balance disorders. Outdated diagnostic order requirements and classifications for audiology services detrimentally limit beneficiary access to care and choice of provider. These unfair and unwarranted inequities result in delayed treatment, unnecessary costs, and frustration for beneficiaries.

To address this inefficiency, MAAIA would make several critical changes:

- **Reclassification of Audiologists as "Practitioners":** The legislation will reclassify audiologists from suppliers to practitioners in the Medicare statute, ensuring patient access to telehealth services, and more efficient deployment of audiologist within the Medicare system.

- **Full Direct Access to Audiologists:** The legislation allows Medicare beneficiaries to see an audiologist without needing a physician's order, mirroring access allowed by private insurers, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHBP). By eliminating the order requirement, this bill reduces duplicative visits and accelerates treatment, saving both time and money for patients and the Medicare system.
- **Coverage along the Continuum of Care:** The bill allows audiologists to be reimbursed for the Medicare-covered services that they are licensed to provide, and that Medicare already covers. Allowing beneficiaries to use their Medicare Part B coverage to seek hearing and balance treatment services from audiologists, will eliminate unnecessary extra visits that occur when patients are shuffled back and forth between providers for services that could be obtained more effectively and efficiently from an audiologist. These services are already covered by Medicare when delivered by other providers.

It is important to clarify that this bill does not expand the scope of practice for audiologists. MAAIA simply ensures that audiologists are reimbursed for the services they are uniquely educated and expertly qualified to provide, and for which they are already licensed to provide under state law.

Medicare's outdated laws and regulations do not align with practices already adopted by private insurers and other federal programs that allow direct access to the full range of audiology services. According to an analysis by the Moran Company, provisions in this bill could save the Medicare program \$108 million over 10 years by reducing duplicative services and save beneficiaries \$36 million in unnecessary copayments.

The *Medicare Audiology Access Improvement Act* (H.R. 6445) is a bipartisan, evidence-based solution that will modernize Medicare to meet the needs of millions of seniors and people with disabilities. By removing unnecessary barriers, this legislation will ensure that beneficiaries can directly access audiologists for all Medicare-covered services they are licensed to provide, while reducing costs for both Medicare and its beneficiaries.

We, the undersigned organizations, respectfully urge Congress to include this vital, bipartisan legislation in its year-end legislative package to ensure older adults and individuals with disabilities have the access to care they deserve.

Sincerely,

Academy of Doctors of Audiology
American Academy of Audiology
American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
American Tinnitus Association
California Academy of Audiology
Colorado Academy of Audiology
Connecticut Academy of Audiology
Connecticut Speech-Language-Hearing Association

Florida Academy of Audiology
Florida Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists
Georgia Academy of Audiology
Illinois Academy of Audiology
Illinois Speech-Language-Hearing Association
Louisiana Academy of Audiology
Louisiana Speech-Language-Hearing Association
Maryland Academy of Audiology
Maryland Speech-Language-Hearing Association
Minnesota Academy of Audiology
Minnesota Speech-Language-Hearing Association
Missouri Academy of Audiology
New Hampshire Academy of Audiology
New Jersey Academy of Audiology
Ohio Academy of Audiology
Oregon Academy of Audiology
Oregon Speech-Language & Hearing Association
Pennsylvania Academy of Audiology
Pennsylvania Speech-Language-Hearing Association
Tennessee Academy of Audiology
Texas Academy of Audiology
Washington Speech-Language-Hearing Association