



*Though beneficiary advocates and audiologists are mostly pleased . . .*

## Dentists Unhappy With W&M Medicare Benefit Expansion Proposal

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The American Dental Association is upset with the House Ways & Means' proposal to cover dental care under Medicare Part B instead of a new, stand-alone benefit, while beneficiary advocates are pleased with the bill but would like to see it extend coverage even further and provide dental benefits sooner. Hearing care providers are also happy with some of the audiology provisions in the bill.

The Ways & Means Committee released legislation Tuesday (Sept. 7) intended for inclusion in a reconciliation package this fall [that outlines how Medicare should cover dental care, as well as vision and hearing services](#).

Dental coverage would start in 2028 under the bill and under Medicare Part B would include preventative screenings and cleanings twice a year, dental x-rays, fluoride treatments, and so-called basic dental treatments. Medicare would pay 80% of the allowable costs for these treatments. Medicare would pay for 50% of costs of so-called major dental treatments once the benefit is fully phased in. Dentures also would be covered every five years under the bill.

The ADA is very disappointed with the House Ways & Means' plan, Senior Vice President of Government and Public Affairs Michael Graham told *Inside Health Policy*. The dental provider organization has been advocating for a stand-alone Medicare dental benefit, dubbed Part T, that would be available to Medicare beneficiaries making up to 300% of the poverty level.

**Graham said the Ways & Means proposal makes it difficult for low-income seniors to access coverage, as the bill would require high cost-sharing for treatments.**

However, Medicare offers support programs that can help qualifying lower-income beneficiaries pay deductibles, coinsurance and copayments for Part B services.

**Additionally, though, Graham said Congress isn't understanding that a Part B coverage program wouldn't work well for dentistry, in part because of the large overhead costs of running a dental office.**

"It just won't work for dentistry and dentists are going to get frustrated just phasing in the program," he said. "Even if reimbursement rates were adequate, they would have to face administrative burdens, just like the physicians do, that would make participation in the program difficult."

The ADA will continue to share its thoughts with lawmakers in the House to let them know the ADA isn't happy with the draft, Graham said.

**Beneficiary advocates, on the other hand, think the Ways & Means bill is a great starting place from which to build comprehensive dental -- and vision and hearing -- care.**

The bill, which largely mimics the 2019 Democratic policy agenda in H.R. 3, shows that lawmakers are committed to getting these benefits passed, said Melissa Burroughs, associate director for strategic partnerships at Families USA.

Still, Burroughs hopes to see major services be reimbursed at 80% of cost like the rest of dental care under the bill and a sooner start date for dental benefits.

[CMS reportedly had said it'll take at least three to five years to stand up a Part B dental benefit, but Burroughs said last week that she believes it could be done earlier.](#)

**Burroughs expects to see some differences in a Senate bill that adds dental, vision and hearing coverage to Medicare, specifically in terms of the way the benefit is structured in its early years, she said.** She isn't expecting any significant amendments to come up during the Ways & Means markup of the bill on Thursday (Sept. 9) and Friday (Sept. 10).

The Ways & Means proposal would be a transformative expansion of coverage, but the Center for Medicare Advocacy hopes to see the coverage start date for dental benefits be accelerated and the scope of coverage broadened, too, Associate Director David Lipschutz said.

**Some lawmakers are still aiming for earlier dental coverage as well.** A spokesperson for Rep. Robin Kelly (D-IL), who previously introduced her own Medicare dental coverage bill, said Kelly is concerned about the 2028 start date and wants to make sure coverage is started as soon as possible. Her bill would begin dental coverage in 2025.

In addition to dental coverage, the Ways & Means bill also extends Medicare Part B to cover aural rehabilitation and treatment services starting Oct. 1, 2023; reclassifies audiologists as practitioners; and covers hearing aids every five years for beneficiaries with profound or severe hearing loss who have a written order for the devices from a physician or participating audiologist.

The American Academy of Audiology was pleased to see audiologists reclassified as practitioners in the bill and able to provide diagnostic and treatment services, said Senior Director of Government Relations Susan Pilch. She also said the organization appreciates that the bill would cover audiologists' services and not just devices.

**However, the Academy is still hoping to see a provision in the final bill that removes a current requirement on the books that Medicare beneficiaries receive a physician referral to access audiology services, Pilch said.** The organization has also had conversations throughout the bill-drafting process about other aspects of the bill, including expanding the degree of hearing loss necessary for hearing aid coverage, she said.

"We're certainly cognizant of the fact that some of these other parameters are sort of budgetarily driven, but overall, I think it's speaking a big step... and certainly we were very pleased to see that services are being allowed are being recognized as important in this process in order to make this a meaningful benefit," Pilch said.

The American Optometric Association did not respond to a request for comment on the bill's vision coverage elements, which would phase in starting Oct. 1, 2022. But the group has supported Part B coverage of vision care as recently as July, according to a news release on its website. -- *Maya Goldman* ([mgoldman@iwppnews.com](mailto:mgoldman@iwppnews.com))

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