

October 2024

The Honorable Ron Wyden  
Chair  
Committee on Finance  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Crapo  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Finance  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Wyden and Ranking Member Crapo,

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, S. 2377) in any year-end legislative package before the 118<sup>th</sup> 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 This bipartisan legislation is essential for expanding access to hearing and balance health care by addressing outdated Medicare laws and regulations that currently impede the ability of older adults to receive timely, effective treatment for auditory and vestibular disorders.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 Outdated diagnostic order requirements and classifications for audiology services detrimentally limit beneficiary access to care and choice of provider.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* (S. 2377) 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