



UnityPoint Health Federal Update – June 2021

May 28, 2021 – June 18, 2021

June 18, 2021

Congress

Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) Released June 2021 Reports to Congress. [MedPAC's second report](#) of the year included [recommendations for Medicare Advantage](#) benchmark reform and streamlining the Alternative Payment Model portfolio. Specifically, MedPAC called for a blended national-local benchmark to drive more efficient bidding among MA plans. It also made recommendations to improve APM performance by mitigating the effects of operating too many concurrent models. MedPAC also reported the results of a study of the role of private equity investment in healthcare. MedPAC did not make recommendations for PE in Medicare, but the panel did raise issues for further evaluation, including a need for increased transparency into organizational structures to facilitate accurate research on the impacts of PE ownership in healthcare. Other topics covered [rural access](#) and [vaccine coverage](#).

Medicaid and Chip Payment and Access Commission's (MACPAC) Also Issued New Recommendations. MACPAC's recommendations focused on a broad array of topics, including pediatric and adult behavioral health, [electronic health records](#) adoption, [specialty drugs](#) and dual-eligible special needs plans. MACPAC suggested Congress increase rebates on drugs approved via accelerated approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration until it verifies clinical benefit. It also [encouraged](#) the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to look at how Medicaid funds can be used for a crisis continuum.

House Appropriations Markup Schedule Released. On Tuesday, House Appropriations Chairwoman Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) [announced that subcommittee markups](#) on the Labor, Health and Human Services (LHHS) appropriations bill would take place on July 12, followed by a full committee vote on July 15. The LHHS bill includes funding for all of HHS' agencies including NIH, CDC, FDA, SAMHSA, and CMS. The House Majority aims to complete all 12 appropriations bills before the August recess.

June 11, 2021

Congress

CMS Filled Principal Deputy Administrator and Chief of Staff Roles. After the confirmation of Chiquita Brooks-LaSure as CMS Administrator two weeks ago, the agency has begun to fill senior slots as it seeks to move forward with President Biden's agenda. Jon Blum will return to the agency to serve as Principal Deputy Administrator and Erin Richardson, who previously worked on the Ways & Means Committee and White House Domestic Policy Council, will fill the role of Chief of Staff to the Administrator. They join Liz Fowler, Deputy CMS Administrator who was appointed to lead the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (CMMI) early in the Biden Administration. The Center for Medicare and Center for Medicaid Directors have not yet been named.



Administration

Becerra Testified on HHS Budget Before House and Senate Committees. In three hearings this week, HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra reiterated many familiar talking points about President Biden's priorities for health care. Across the hearings, Becerra spoke favorably about telehealth's impact on access, the department's commitment to expanded health care coverage, the importance of health equity and a need to address the price of prescription drugs. During his Wednesday hearing with the Senate Appropriations Committee, Becerra stated that additional guidance on remaining Provider Relief Funds was forthcoming this month, but that it would only apply to new distributions. He also indicated that the Department may work toward reducing availability of short-term plans. Many questions at Thursday's hearing with [Senate Finance](#) focused on the Department's plan for a public option, which Secretary Becerra said he believed was necessary to ensure all Americans had a quality health plan available to them; however, Becerra said he looks to Congress to further those efforts.

June 4, 2021

Congress

Doctors of Community (DOC) Act Would Enhance Graduate Medical Education. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Representative Frank Pallone (D-NJ) are [sponsoring](#) a bill that would permanently authorize funding for the Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education (THCGME) program at \$500 million annually from 2024-2033. By more than tripling the current level of funding, the DOC Act could help create 100 new THCGME programs targeted at high-need communities, as well as 1,600 new residency slots, largely concentrated at Federally Qualified Health Centers, Rural Health Clinics and tribal health centers. If passed, the DOC Act would be largest investment in THCGME programs in 20 years.

House Subcommittee Chair asks Government Accountability Office (GAO) to Investigate Private Equity Investment in Healthcare. In March, the House Ways and Means Oversight Subcommittee continued inquiries into the role and implications of private equity investment in healthcare interests, and specifically looked at the potential impact of private equity buyouts of healthcare providers with a specific focus on nursing homes. In that hearing, witnesses described a need for additional data and transparency to have a better understanding of how private equity ownership can impact quality of care. Now, the Oversight Subcommittee Chair, Bill Pascrell (D-NJ), has [asked the GAO](#) to look at trends in bankruptcies following private equity acquisition of healthcare providers; any geographic trends on buyouts followed by bankruptcies, including any disproportionate impact on underserved communities; and what is known about the impact of such bankruptcies on the healthcare workforce and patients. The panel's request and the ensuing report are potentially setting the stage for future legislative action.

Administration

Biden's \$6 Trillion Budget Outlines High Hopes for Healthcare. Building on the pared-down "[skinny budget](#)" released on April 9, the President released a full and more comprehensive budget plan on May 28. The President's full budget is an ambitious blueprint for White House policy priorities in a narrowly controlled Democratic Congress. For the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(HHS\)](#), Biden's proposal calls for \$131.8 billion in discretionary budget authority and \$1.5 trillion in mandatory funding—a 23% increase over 2021. This includes broad proposals to allow Medicare to negotiate prices for prescription drugs; expand Medicare benefits to include vision, dental and hearing coverage; lower the Medicare eligibility age to 60 years old and create a public option in the federal ACA exchange marketplace. It also calls for significant investments across HHS agencies to advance health equity.



White House Proposed ‘National Month of Action’ to Spur Vaccinations. The [initiative](#) seeks to have 70% of adults in the U.S. at least partially vaccinated by Independence Day. The Month of Action will engage celebrities, businesses and community organizations at national and local levels. From lotteries to sweepstakes to accommodations for travel and childcare, the Biden Administration hopes that these incentives will drive up lagging vaccination rates and raise the current nationwide percentage of around 50% to 70% in just four weeks.

May 28, 2021

Congress

HCBS Drive Partisan Divide on Infrastructure Deal. President Biden’s American Jobs Plan included \$400 billion [directed](#) at HCBS. That money, in part, was focused on expanding the healthcare workforce to permit Medicaid beneficiaries to remain in their homes or communities, as well as additional support for the Money Follows the Person Program. This week, the HCBS funding emerged as an impasse for bipartisan discussions. Republicans countered on Thursday with a package nearly 50 percent less than Biden’s proposal and that strikes all HCBS spending. In their plan, Republicans noted they focused on more traditional infrastructure funding, like building bridges and roads. The Biden Administration, however, has signaled that eliminating this additional support to the Medicaid population is not on the table. Lawmakers continue to work towards a compromise; however, Democrats are increasingly considering turning once again to the reconciliation process where they would not need Republican support.

Democratic Lawmakers Revive the Push for a Public Option. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Representative Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ)—the respective chairs of Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions and the House Committee on Energy and Commerce—jointly [issued](#) a request for information (RFI) this week. The RFI is comprehensive in scope and solicits broad input on aspects of designing a public option including eligibility, benefit packages, reimbursement rates and prices, premium support and interaction with other programs. While the current makeup of Congress does not suggest legislative action on a public option is probable in the near-term, responses will serve as a litmus test of public option ambitions and shape conversations around the 2022 midterm elections. Responses to the RFI are due by July 31.

Administration

Senate Confirms Chiquita Brooks-LaSure as CMS Administrator. With 55 votes—the same as her predecessor, Seema Verma—Chiquita Brooks-LaSure finally secured the nation’s top Medicare post. Republican Senators voting to confirm Brooks-LaSure included Senator Roy Blunt (R-MO), Senator Susan Collins (R-ME), Senator Jerry Moran (R-KS), Senator Richard Burr (R-NC), and Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK). Brooks-LaSure helped craft and implement the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in her role in the Obama Administration, and she is widely expected to wield CMS’s regulatory powers to bolster the law and reverse Trump-era policies consistent with previously outlined Biden Administration objectives. With Brooks-LaSure’s confirmation, President Biden is one step closer to rounding out his key leadership team in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), with selections for the Center for Medicare, Center for Medicaid and CHIP Services, and Center for Consumer Information and Insurance Oversight expected imminently. Earlier this week, [HHS announced](#) a number of other appointments, including counselors and special assistants. Still no apparent movement toward nominating an FDA Commissioner.