



## **Congress Must Enact The Audiology Patient Choice Act to Improve Audiologic Care under Medicare**

### **The Background:**

- Hearing loss is the third most common chronic disorder for Americans over 65, behind only arthritis and high blood pressure.
- Nearly half of Americans over age 75 suffer from hearing loss.
- Individuals with mild hearing loss are three times more likely to experience a fall (Johns Hopkins). Falls are the leading cause of injury and death for Americans over 65, as well as the most common cause of injuries and hospital admissions for trauma.
- Untreated hearing and balance problems contribute to and are highly correlated with depression and social isolation. Treatment reduces societal and financial costs.
- Seniors with hearing loss run a much higher risk of cognitive problems and experience cognitive decline up to 40% faster than those with normal hearing.
- The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) projects there will be a shortage of 46,000 medical doctor specialists over the next decade.

### **The Issue:**

Medicare has not kept pace with changes in health care delivery models for diagnosing and treating hearing and balance disorders. Thus, patient access to care and choice of provider is detrimentally limited, and the treatment process inefficient. Medicare's archaic supervisory and referral requirements must be modernized to allow seniors direct access to efficient, effective care. Other federal programs, such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Federal Employees Health Benefits program, already allow direct access to audiologists, as do many private health insurance plans.

### **The Solution:**

Proposed legislation to improve Medicare policy and provide better access to audiology and vestibular care has received bi-partisan support in Congress. Representatives Tom Rice (R-SC), Matt Cartwright (D-PA), and Lynn Jenkins (R-KS) have introduced the H.R. 2276 Audiology Patient Choice Act in the 115th Congress to make the much-needed changes to Medicare as follows:

- To allow patients to choose from among qualified providers, for Medicare-covered Audiology services;
- To allow audiologists to be reimbursed under Medicare for the Medicare-covered services that they are licensed to provide; and
- To appropriately classify audiologists as "physicians" under Medicare.

Congress should pass this legislation without delay to expand patient choice and increase provider competition. The only documented opposition to the Audiology Patient Choice Act has been raised by competing providers who have a financial interest in preserving the status quo.

**Important Note:** The legislation would neither change audiologists' current scope of practice, nor would it provide Medicare coverage of hearing aids.

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