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Bipartisan Bill Would Expand Access to Telemedicine

WASHINGTON—Congressmen Mike Thompson (D-CA), Bart Stupak (D-MI), Lee Terry (R-NE), and Sam Johnson (R-TX) introduced bipartisan legislation that would significantly increase the availability of telemedicine for all Americans. Currently about 80% of Americans do not have access to telemedicine facilities because of restrictions that limit funding for these types of facilities to rural areas. The “Medicare Telehealth Enhancement Act,” (H.R. 2068), would expand Medicare reimbursement to urban and suburban areas and include more facilities. It will also allow doctors to monitor patients remotely.

“As healthcare becomes more expensive, we need to use smart innovations such as telemedicine technology to help lower costs and expand access for all Americans,” said Congressman Thompson. “Allowing doctors to remotely monitor a patient who has congestive heart failure could not only help a patient stay healthy, it could also reduce costly visits to the emergency room. The Obama Administration has indicated that telemedicine will be an important part of their health care reform agenda, and I look forward to working with them to expand access to this important technology.”

Telemedicine can help provide better management of chronic diseases, reduce emergency room admissions, and lower healthcare costs. Telemedicine services can also play an important role in addressing the epidemic of physician shortages in rural America by bringing physician specialty services to remote and underserved communities. In addition, faster diagnoses enabled by telemedicine allow patients to get care more quickly. This technology is an important resource, but Medicare reimbursement for

telemedicine services is currently limited to rural areas and specific types of health facilities.

“Telemedicine is a critical piece to the future of health care,” said Congressman Terry. “By using telemedicine we can increase the efficiency of healthcare while keeping costs down especially to our rural areas of the country.”

“Telemedicine has proven its ability to increase the quality of health care while reducing costs,” Congressman Stupak said. “The Medicare Telehealth Enhancement Act will bring telemedicine into new settings and expand the pool of Medicare providers eligible to participate in the telehealth program. The demand for telemedicine is only going to increase and it is appropriate that our federal health programs lead the way in effectively and efficiently utilizing these technologies.”

“Where you live shouldn’t determine the quality of healthcare you receive. Technology has advanced to allow doctors to take care of patients in any location. It’s time to modernize Medicare to make it even more accessible,” said Congressman Johnson.

The legislation also provides \$30 million in grant funding to help health facilities pay for the telehealth equipment and to expand telehealth support services.

Last July, Congressman Thompson and Stupak’s provisions to expand the types of facilities authorized to provide telehealth care were passed into law as part of the Medicare Improvement for Patients and Providers Act. This bill will further expand the type of facilities that are eligible.

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