



GRASSROOTS UPDATE

for Very Influential Physicians



Welcome to this month's edition of the AMA's Very Influential Physician (VIP) Insider. Read on for details about these topics:

- Congress approves spending bill, including important health provisions
- 2018 AMA Advocacy Conference - to succeed as a physician advocate, share your story
- What physicians need to know about how to reach lawmakers
- Upcoming webinar: Influencing Staff
- AMA launches advocacy issue video series

Congress approves spending bill, including important health provisions

Early in the morning on Feb. 9, the Senate and House passed the [Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018](#), which President Donald Trump then signed into law. In addition to continuing to fund the federal government through March 23, the most recent continuing resolution (CR) addressed a broad range of health, supplemental spending, budget, and tax matters.

The legislation included technical corrections to the Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act (MACRA) that were sought by the AMA and other medical societies, such as:

- Medicare Part B drug costs will be excluded from payment adjustments under MACRA's Merit-based Incentive Payment System (MIPS) and from low-volume threshold determinations.
- Greater flexibility will be provided for an additional three years in scoring and in the weight given to the Cost component of MIPS.
- The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services will have more flexibility in setting overall performance thresholds for three more years.
- The Physician Focused Payment Model Technical Advisory Committee's authority has been clarified so that it can provide more helpful feedback on proposed alternative payment models.

Other provisions of interest to physicians include the following:

- The Independent Payment Advisory Board was permanently repealed.
- The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) was extended for an additional four years beyond the previous CR's six-year extension.
- The work Geographic Practice Cost Index floor for Medicare fee schedule payments was extended for two years.
- The statutory requirement for electronic health record standards to become more stringent over time was eliminated.
- Two-year extensions were provided for the National Health Service Corps, Community Health Centers, and the Teaching Health Centers Graduate Medical Education program.
- Emergency Medicaid funding was provided for Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and supplemental disaster relief was provided for areas recently affected by hurricanes and wildfires.
- Originally, the proposal would have extended the current misvalued code process for 2019, which would have resulted in the elimination of virtually all of the currently scheduled Medicare physician payment updates. Instead, the update was reduced from 0.5 percent to 0.25 percent to help offset the cost of

other policies that benefited physicians.

Bipartisan agreement was also reached on providing additional funds to address the [opioid crisis](#), rebuild and improve U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals and clinics, and for the National Institutes of Health.

The AMA [sent a letter](#) to the Senate and House leadership on Feb. 8 urging passage of the bill.

2018 AMA Advocacy Conference - to succeed as a physician advocate, share your story

Today's political climate may be unlike anything the seasoned physician advocates who gathered in Washington, D.C., for the recent AMA National Advocacy Conference have ever experienced. But the fundamentals of promoting the interests of their patients and profession remain the same: Use facts and personal stories while building relationships and serving as a resource.

"Tell a local story about how regulations or legislation are affecting your patients and their constituents," Richard Deem, AMA senior vice president for advocacy, told the 400-plus attendees at the start of conference.

Deem was followed by Cynthia Brown, AMA vice president of government affairs, who added that one of the fundamentals to promoting an advocacy agenda is building long-term relationships with legislators and connecting with their staff members.

The packet all attendees received contained a very recent example of how to do this. Attendees received a copy of the AMA's [letter to Congressional leaders](#) supporting the recently approved Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, a summary of AMA-supported [provisions in the bill](#), and a listing of who voted for and against it. Advocates were urged to send thank-you emails to their legislators who supported the measure.

T.C. Roberge, AMA senior assistant director for Congressional affairs, noted that it's important to show gratitude and that it helps you develop relationships with lawmakers if you are not always going to Capitol Hill with "an urgent ask."

AMA-supported items in the budget bill included improvements to the Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act of 2015 and repeal of the Independent Payment Advisory Board.

What the budget deal did not include was a previous proposal to extend the [misvalued codes](#) policy that would have virtually eliminated the 2019 Medicare physician payment update and could have led to a payment decrease in 2020.

Deem said that, in less than 24 hours, Congress had received 3,000 emails protesting that proposal. He added that physicians in Congress went to their respective leaders and were "able to turn this thing around."

Jason Marino, AMA senior assistant director for Congressional affairs, later gave attendees the behind-the-scenes scoop of how AMA lobbyists caught wind of the proposal at a Feb. 3 charity event and had to swing into action and grab lawmakers' attention over Super Bowl weekend. He emphasized the importance of those 3,000 emails in making Representatives and Senators pay attention to concerns over an "obscure" policy like misvalued codes.

Like Deem, Marino also credited the physicians in Congress for telling their leaders that MACRA cannot work if they take away its modest Medicare payment updates.

With such a recent and significant example of the power of physician advocacy, the message delivered by Vidya Kora, MD, board chair of AMPAC, the AMA political action committee, resonated with attendees.

[Full story](#)

Congressional Check-Up - what physicians need to know about how to reach lawmakers

There are several ways to let lawmakers know your views on pending legislation or policies. And there are ways

physician advocates can ensure that their message registers and resonates whether it's delivered in person, over the phone, by email or letter, or via social media.

In [Congressional Check-Up, A Guide to Physician Advocacy](#) AMA experts provide tips on how doctors can make their voices be heard with thoughtful and deliberate engagement. They add that "it's imperative members of Congress hear from you while they create, debate and enact healthcare legislation."

The guide notes that in-person visits can be a very effective way to discuss legislative issues and priorities.

"One-on-one is still the best way to communicate—when you can shake their hand and look them in the eye," said Henry Dorkin, MD, president of the Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS).

An in-person visit requires careful planning and establishing clear goals for the meeting.

Start by contacting the legislator's scheduler and request a meeting with the lawmaker and their health legislative assistant. Explain the purpose of the meeting, the issues you want to discuss, and whom you represent.

Experts warn against being let down if you only meet with staff and to be respectful—their youthful appearance doesn't mean that they are not well informed.

"If you meet with an aide, don't feel insulted," said MMS past President Dennis Dimitri, MD. "They may be young, but they're bright, hard-working, and they write most of the legislation."

He recommends staying in touch with the legislative assistants you meet, finding small things you can agree on and building a relationship from that.

Visitors should arrive on time, but not be surprised if the lawmaker is late, cannot attend or if the meeting is interrupted.

Carole Allen, MD, a member of the MMS Board of Trustees and a former American Academy of Pediatrics board member, offers advice on that last part, as votes, hearings or other matters often call a senator or representative away from a meeting. It's good to prepare an agenda and to rehearse your presentation to help the meeting stay on point.

[Continue to full article](#)

Join us for the latest in CMF webinar series: Influencing Staff: What Congress' Policy Advisers Want in Briefing Materials

On February 22 at 1:00 PM EST our partners at CMF will discuss the issue of what Congressional staff are looking for in the briefing materials you provide.

[Register here!](#)

Every year, advocates spend a great deal of time and sacrifice thousands of trees to produce materials that they can leave behind after meetings with Congress. Unfortunately, only one-third of congressional staff feel that the "leave behinds" that constituents provide are helpful. Furthermore congressional staff are unlikely to tell constituent groups about shortcomings in their briefing materials or pet peeves about poorly-handled policy meetings. This content is based on a survey of House and Senate Legislative Assistants and Legislative Directors and is the first research to explore: the materials and content that legislative staff feel is most valuable for making policy recommendations to their boss; common mistakes groups make in meeting with legislative staff; and the best strategies for following up with legislative staff after meetings.

During this program, participants will learn the following:

- What information should constituents provide?
- How do congressional staff use the information constituents provide
- What's the best way to deliver briefing materials

This webinar is made available to members of the Very Important Physicians as part of our partnership with the Congressional Management Fund. If you have any questions regarding this presentation, please contact Jaime Werner at CMF at JWerner@CongressFoundation.org.

AMA launches advocacy issue video series

Recently the AMA [launched a series of videos](#) covering ten of the top advocacy priorities for the year. The videos feature AMA President David O. Barbe, MD discussing important topics such as Prior Authorization, ending the opioid epidemic, and drug pricing transparency. These videos are meant to raise awareness and advocacy on these important topics.



[AMA Physicians' Grassroots Network](#)



[AMPAC](#)

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