

MENTAL Health counselors Included in Rural Health Care Legislation
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ACA's effort to gain Medicare reimbursement for state-licensed mental health counselors took one step forward on June 13 with the introduction of S.3500, the Rural Hospital and Provider Equity (R-HoPE) Act of 20py. S. 3500 was introduced by a bipartisan group of Senate Rural Health Caucus members, of which Sen. Craig Thomas (R-Wyo.) and Sen. Kent Conrad (D-S.D.) serve as co-chairs. The legislation was referred to the Senate Finance Committee. The R-HoPE Act brings to five the total number of proposals under which mental health counselors could bill Medicare.

In Addition, bi-partisan legislation introduced by Thomas and his Finance committee colleague, Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.) is pending in the Senate (S.784) to reimburse mental health counselors under Medicare. In May, Rep. Barbara Cubin (R-Wyo.) introduced a House companion bill (H.R. 5324) to S. 784. The Medicare Mental Health Modernization Act (H.R. 1946)/(S. 927) would, among other things, allow mental health counselors to provide mental health services to Medicare beneficiaries. It is also pending.

In addition to allowing licensed mental health counselors to bill Medicare, S.3500 would adjust Medicare payments to rural hospitals and make a series of changes to boost funding for rural clinics, doctors and ambulances. Although the legislation's primary focus is on rural health care, S. 350 would allow mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists to be reimbursed in all areas of the country.