

SENATE FINANCE KICKS OFF PHYSICIAN PAYMENT REFORM DELIBERATIONS WITH HEARING

The Senate Finance Committee is taking a first step toward potential large-scale Medicare physician payment reform with a hearing that will focus on how Medicare can incentivize providers to better treat and manage chronic conditions.

The hearing comes shortly after Congress mitigated a 3.4% Medicare physician payment cut that went into effect in January and as a bipartisan group of senators, many on the Finance Committee, are working on long-term reforms to the physician payment system.

Titled "Bolstering Chronic Care through Medicare Physician Payment," the Senate Finance Committee's April 11 hearing will include testimony by American College of Surgeons Executive Director and CEO Patricia Turner, American Academy of Family Physicians President Steven Furr, Physicians of Southwest Washington CEO Melanie Matthews and University of Pennsylvania Associate Professor Amol Navathe.

In announcing the hearing, Finance Chair Ron Wyden's (D-OR) office touted the chair's "longstanding commitment to updating and strengthening Medicare's guarantee of high-quality health benefits for chronic illnesses such as cancer, diabetes, and heart disease."

The scheduled hearing comes after Congress managed to pass a skinny package of health extenders for fiscal 2024 in early March that included a 1.68% partial fix for the 3.37% cut to Medicare physician payments. Though stakeholders say it's time for Congress to stop its annual cycle of payment cuts and patches and focus on Medicare reform.

Earlier this year, a bipartisan group of six senators started a Medicare Payment Reform Working Group with the primary goal of proposing long-term reforms to the Medicare Physician Fee Schedule and an update to the Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act upon which the current physician payment system is based.

"We believe Congress must make changes to the current Medicare physician payment system to ensure financial stability for providers, improve patient outcomes, promote access to quality care, and incentivize the utilization of emerging health care technology," Sens. Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV), Marsha Blackburn (R-TN.), John Thune (R-SD), John Barrasso (R-WY), Debbie Stabenow (D-MI.), and Mark Warner (D-VA) said in a note to stakeholders.

"This working group is committed to exploring and proposing policy solutions for stable physician payments and necessary updates to MACRA, ensuring sustained access to quality care for patients," they later added.