

July 13, 2009

Senator Jeff Merkley
107 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC, 20510

Dear Senator Merkley,

We are writing in strong support of your amendment to create an independent commission to advise the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) on the essential benefits package. Collectively, our organizations represent millions of consumers, patients, providers and workers, many of whom are struggling to afford the care they need to maintain their health and safety as well as their jobs and quality of life.

We believe this amendment will help improve the development of a federal benefit standard by requiring the Commission to engage in a fully open, transparent, and inclusive process that ensures full engagement of consumers, patients, workers and providers.

In particular, we applaud that your amendment:

- Requires the Commission to include a health care provider, a patient or consumer advocate, a representative of a labor organization representing workers, and an individual with expertise in pediatric health care.
- Requires the Commission to consider the affordability of the benefits covered, the financial protection of enrollees against high health care expenses, and access to necessary healthcare services, including primary and preventive health services.
- Requires an open and public process through public hearings, meetings and listening sessions, and ensures there will be mechanisms in place for the public to provide input.
- Requires the Secretary, on an annual basis, to assess (1) whether enrollees are facing any difficulty accessing needed services for reasons of coverage or cost, and (2) whether the essential benefits package needs to be modified or updated to account for changes in medical evidence or scientific advancement.
- Requires the Secretary to report to Congress and the public on how the benefit package will be modified to address any such gaps in access or changes in the evidence base.

We believe the difficult decisions about the specific services and items that must be covered should not be made solely by HHS. Instead, we believe a council of non-partisan health experts and stakeholders provides a preferred way to shape a benefit package that is grounded in science and in the best interest of consumers and patients.

Again, we thank you for offering this amendment and are happy to offer our support.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Youth
AFL-CIO

AIDS Action Baltimore
Alliance for Children and Families
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Academy of HIV Medicine
American Academy of Home Care Physicians
American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)
American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network
American Chiropractic Association
American Counseling Association
American Diabetes Association
American Heart Association/American Stroke Association
American Hospice Foundation
American Lung Association
American Nurses Association (ANA)
American Optometric Association
American Psychological Association
American Social Health Association
American Society of PeriAnesthesia Nurses
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare
Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN)
Autism Society of America
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Black Women's Health Imperative
BlueWaveNJ
CAEAR Coalition
Center for Independence of the Disabled of New York
Center for Medicare Advocacy
CHADD – Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
Child Welfare League of America
Childbirth Connection
Clinical Social Work Association
Community Catalyst
Easter Seals
Eastern Maine AIDS Network (EMAN)
Family Equality Council
Health Care For All
HIV Medicine Association
Immune Deficiency Foundation
Japanese American Citizens League (JACL)
Malecare Prostate Cancer Support
Maryland Women's Coalition for Health Care Reform
NAACP
National Abortion Federation
National Association of Neighborhoods

National Association of Social Workers
National Coalition For Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual And Transgender Health
National Coalition of Mental Health Consumer/Survivor Organizations
National Congress of the American Indians
National Council of Jewish Women
National Partnership for Women & Families
National Physicians Alliance
National Spinal Cord Injury Association
National Women's Health Network
National Women's Law Center
New Yorkers for Accessible Health Coverage
Out With Cancer - The LGBT Cancer Project
Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) National
Project Inform
Prostate Cancer International
Raising Women's Voices for the Health Care We Need
Rev. Nancy Wilson, Moderator, Metropolitan Community Churches
SEIU
Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS)
The AIDS Institute
United Neighborhood Centers of America
United Spinal Association
US Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association (USPRA)