



ALERT: Support Needed NOW to Restore Hearing Aids, Eyeglasses and Vision Care, and Podiatry for Aged and Disabled Medicaid Clients

Restored Mental Health Professional Services Have Been Approved

The conference committee on SB 1 (the state appropriations bill for 2006-2007) has so far NOT agreed to restore Medicaid podiatry, eyeglasses, or hearing aid benefits for adults on Medicaid, which were cut by the 78th Legislature. Messages to the House's budget conferees are needed NOW to urge them to "finish the job" and approve funding to allow these impoverished and predominantly elderly or disabled Texans to access vital services.

The Senate's version of the budget includes funding (\$55.7 million General Revenue) to restore eyeglasses, hearing aids and podiatric care, as well as mental health services, while the House budget included no funding, but instead listed restoring these benefits as its top priority on its Article XI "wish list" (see Policy Page #236). The conference committee so far has agreed to restore the mental health benefits (\$44.6 million GR), but has not approved restoring eyeglasses, hearing aids, or podiatry (\$11.1 million GR).

PLEASE CALL THE HOUSE CONFERENCE COMMITTEE MEMBERS NOW AND TELL THEM TO FUND THESE IMPORTANT SERVICES FOR OUR VULNERABLE TEXANS.

House Budget Conferees:

Chairman Jim Pitts: (512) 463-0516

Vice-Chairman Vilma Luna: (512) 463-0484

Representative Dan Gattis: (512) 463-0309

Representative Lois Kolkhorst: (512) 463-0600

Representative Sylvester Turner: (512) 463-0554

Background and Talking Points:

- **The great majority (77%) of adult clients who lost these benefits are elderly or disabled.** In April 2005, there were 864,894 adults on Texas Medicaid. Of these, 670,157 (77%) were elderly or disabled (353,537 elderly, and 316,620 disabled or blind).
- **Most of the elderly and disabled live below the poverty line:** About 60% of the aged and disabled group is folks living on SSI, which means living on \$579 per month in 2005 – less than 75% of the poverty line. The other 40% have somewhat higher incomes, but they must turn over most of their income (i.e., all but their \$45 personal needs allowance) to a nursing home or a residential setting – in some cases they may actually have less to spend than the SSI clients! **Thus, very, very few can afford to replace these services now that Medicaid has stopped covering them.**
- **The majority (63%) of adult clients who lost these benefits are NOT covered by Medicare, and thus cannot get hearing aids, eyeglasses and vision care, or podiatry benefits from that program.**
- **The 37% of Medicaid adults who ARE covered by Medicare CANNOT get eyeglasses or hearing aids from Medicare, because that program does NOT cover those benefits.** Medicare does not pay for routine eye exams and eyeglasses, and does not pay for "hearing aids or examination for the purpose of prescribing, fitting, or changing hearing aids."

- The 37% who get Medicare also may not qualify for podiatric care, Medicare does NOT cover routine podiatry, and covers podiatry services only for foot disease and routine podiatry for diabetics.

Why Are These Services So Important?

Podiatry is critical for persons with diabetes, as well as those with other circulatory and mobility impairments. Without timely podiatry care, foot ailments can worsen, leading to loss of mobility and avoidable amputations.

- **It is estimated that over 116,000 diabetics have lost podiatry coverage due to this cut.** Diabetes advocates warn that the elimination of podiatry services care will increase the number of Texans living with amputations, with the resulting disabilities driving more poor Texans living with diabetic complications out of the workforce, and into the disability assistance system.
- **Diabetes disproportionately affects Hispanic and African-American Texans**, who are 1.9 and 1.7 times more likely to have diabetes, and are at far greater risk of subsequent amputations, than other Americans.

Eyeglasses.

- **Diabetes** advocates note that vision problems are a common effect of diabetes.
- Texas groups that help low-income persons get eyeglasses must now **redirect their scarce resources** to accommodate a huge new population of elders and disabled persons in poverty who lack coverage for this critical benefit. This in turn **limits funds available for children** who need glasses.
- Nursing home, adult day care and residential providers for **persons with mental retardation** report many clients in need of eyeglasses but who have **no way to pay** for them.
- One optometrist who works with nursing facilities reports that **half of his clients are now not getting eye glasses**; many have no family at all, some have family that cannot afford eyewear (which often costs \$150 or more), and still others have no relatives willing to pay.

Hearing aids are needed by a significant percentage of elderly Medicaid clients.

- **AARP reports that nearly 40% of Americans have hearing impairment by age 65**, and the percentage increases thereafter.
- **Hearing aid prices in Texas range from \$400 to \$3,000 (before taxes or fitting charges).** Even at the lowest price, it is virtually certain that a senior or disabled person living on SSI's \$579 per month will be unable to afford a hearing aid now (Medicare does not cover hearing aids). Concerns about this issue are also being raised by nursing homes. Residents who lose or break a hearing aid may simply have to go without.
- **One hearing aid provider in rural Northeast Texas reports that about 10% of his clientele (and 10% of his business) have lost access to hearing aids because of this cut.** His clients are primarily elderly, with about 70% of the Medicaid clients being nursing home residents, and the remainder mostly seniors and disabled adults (including individuals with mental retardation). This is the only hearing aid provider within 150 miles that has accepted Medicaid, and he routinely serves clients from several surrounding counties. He reports that the majority of his senior clients have no family support. The minimum income to qualify for a hearing aid loan is above the SSI income limit, and those few seniors who can qualify would be subject to very high interest rates on those loans. He reports that nearly all his senior Medicaid clients will simply have to go without a hearing aid, as there are no charity programs available to serve them.

For more information about this *Policy Page* contact Anne Dunkelberg at: dunkelberg@cphp.org, or (512) 320-0222 X102.

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