

Federal Health Update

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EXECUTIVE AND CONGRESSIONAL NEWS

- **News this week revealed that Congress is working toward a Continuing Resolution to keep the government funded through Oct. 1, 2016.** There is debate between the Democrats and Republicans on how long it will last. Currently none of the 2017 appropriations bills have passed both chambers of Congress.

- **The House Veteran Affairs Committee held hearing on Sept. 7, 2016, to examine The Commission on Care and the Future of the VA Healthcare System.**

Nancy Schlichting, chair and Dr. Delos (Toby) M. Cosgrove, vice chair for the VA Commission on Care testified that their report The CoC report calls for creation of a 'fully integrated care system', which would leverage private sector care providers who fully understand the needs and experiences of veterans would be able to provide care in a system that integrates that care with that provided by VHA providers.

They also recommended the VA transform its internal processes, including information technology, supply chains, and personnel management. In addition the commission recommended eliminating the geographic and wait time constraints on veterans obtaining care in the private sector.

MILITARY HEALTH CARE NEWS

- **The Department of Defense issued a final rule in the *Federal Register* modifying its TRICARE program to increase access to mental health services and substance abuse treatment.**

The rule expands TRICARE coverage to intensive outpatient programs for mental health and substance abuse treatment as well as opioid treatment programs. As part of this expansion, the rule includes stipulations to develop reimbursement methodologies for these newly added programs. It also aims to streamline the requirements for providers to become authorized under TRICARE and to eliminate limitations on coverage of mental health and substance abuse treatment for TRICARE members.

The expanded programs are expected to increase government costs by about \$58 million annually, according to an independent cost estimate.

VETERANS AFFAIRS NEWS

- **Veterans receiving care at Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Medical Centers will now be able to schedule routine ear and eye appointments at local VA Audiology and Optometry clinics without a primary care referral.**

Before now, veterans seeking appointments with audiologists or optometrists had to first make an appointment with a primary care physician for a referral for a routine clinic consult visit. A clinic representative would contact the patient to set up the consult appointment, which could result in a several weeks'-long lag between the appointment and when the Veteran was actually seen. The new process, the Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative, which began as a successful pilot at three sites in 2015, is being expanded to all VA Medical Centers.

The Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative is expected to be fully operational within all VA Medical Centers by the end of 2016.

- **The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has awarded \$7.8 million in grants for adaptive sports programs for disabled veterans and disabled servicemembers of the Armed Forces.**

The grant recipients may use these funds for planning, developing, managing and implementing these adaptive sports programs.

VA is awarding the grants to national governing bodies, which prepare high-level athletes for Paralympic competition; veterans service organizations; city and regional municipalities; and other community groups to provide a wide range of adaptive sports opportunities for eligible veterans and servicemembers. The grants will support activities ranging from rowing, cycling, skiing, equestrian sports and Tai Chi.

VA will distribute the grants to 90 national, regional and community programs serving all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Approximately 10,000 veterans and servicemembers are expected to benefit. Authorities for certain adaptive sports programs and

grant programs expire on September 30, 2016, without reauthorization action by Congress.

Information about the awardees and details of the program may be found at www.va.gov/adaptivesports.

GENERAL HEALTH CARE NEWS

- **The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced a \$350,000 supplement to a one year cooperative agreement with the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to help expand capacity for caring for children who are or may be impacted by the Zika virus.**

AAP will use these funds to provide technical assistance and education, including tele-consultation, to clinicians at community health centers and other health care sites in the United States and its territories, including Puerto Rico and South Florida, providing care to children who are or may be impacted by Zika virus.

Zika is spread primarily through a mosquito's bite and may also be sexually transmitted by a person who has been infected with Zika. Many people infected with Zika virus won't have symptoms or will have only mild symptoms. However, Zika infection during pregnancy can cause a birth defect of the brain called microcephaly and other severe fetal brain defects. The extent of other possible birth defects of the eye, hearing deficits, and impaired growth is unclear.

Researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that the risk of a baby developing a severe brain defect could be as high as 13 percent among women infected with the Zika virus in the first trimester of pregnancy.

Discussions of developmental screening, clinical management and family support approaches can help clinicians serving pregnant women, infants and children, increasing access to well-coordinated, family-centered care in a medical home for children and families impacted by Zika-related complications.

For more information on Zika, visit cdc.gov/zika.

- **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has awarded \$2.4 million to Chicago, Houston, New York City, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles County to establish, enhance, and maintain information-gathering systems to rapidly detect microcephaly—a serious birth defect of the brain—and other adverse outcomes linked to Zika virus infection.**

This funding is in addition to the [\\$16.4 million](#) recently awarded to states and territories for surveillance of microcephaly and other adverse outcomes and will enable these local areas to participate in these important activities in coordination with state efforts. The funds will allow these local areas to:

- Enhance information-gathering to carry out strategies for real-time, population-based monitoring for microcephaly and other birth defects caused by Zika virus
- Enhance capacity development through partner collaboration and infrastructure improvements
- Provide referral of infants and families to health and social resources
- Participate in CDC data reporting
- Expand access to examination of health and monitoring of developmental outcomes of children born to women with positive or inconclusive Zika virus test results

As of August 26, CDC had obligated more than \$193 million of the repurposed funds available for Zika preparedness, including over \$110 million to support state, territorial, and local jurisdictions fight Zika. As of August 26, HHS has obligated \$264 million of the \$374 million redirected for the domestic Zika response.

Zika virus spreads to people primarily through the bite of an infected *Aedes* species mosquito (specifically, *Aedes aegypti* and *Aedes albopictus*). Zika infection can also be spread by infected men and women to their sex partners. There is no vaccine or treatment for Zika and many people infected with Zika have no symptoms. Of those who do have symptoms, the most common are fever, rash, joint pain, and conjunctivitis (red eyes). Zika infection during pregnancy can cause microcephaly and other severe brain abnormalities in the developing fetus.

CDC encourages everyone, especially pregnant women and women planning to become pregnant, to protect themselves from mosquito bites to avoid possible Zika virus infection.

For more information about Zika, please visit <https://www.cdc.gov/zika/>.

- **With open enrollment for 2017 only a few weeks away, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), announced \$63 million in Navigator grant awards to returning and new organizations.**

These awards will support local in-person assistance to help consumers navigate, shop, and enroll in the wide variety of Marketplace coverage options.

Navigators are trained individuals and organizations who help consumers, small businesses, and employees as they look for health coverage options and financial assistance through the Marketplace. Navigators can meet in person with consumers and help them understand the coverage options available to them as well as help them pick, apply for, and enroll in a plan of their choice. Consumers in Federally-facilitated Marketplaces, including State Partnership Marketplaces, can visit [Find Local Help](#) to find assistance in their area.

This year, 96 returning organizations and 2 new organizations in the state of Hawaii received a grant award. This is the second year of a three-year funding cycle for the returning grantees that currently provide local in-person assistance. The 2015 Navigator Funding Opportunity Announcement required applicants to submit a proposal covering the full 36-month project period. Funding is released in 12 month increments as CMS continually assesses Navigator grantees' performance for ongoing support.

For a list of CMS Navigator awardees or more information about Navigators and other Marketplace resources, please visit: <https://www.cms.gov/CCIIO/Programs-and-Initiatives/Health-Insurance-Marketplaces/Downloads/Navigator-Grantee-Summaries-2016.pdf>

REPORTS/POLICIES

- **The GAO published “Private Health Insurance: In Most States and New Exchanges, Enrollees Continued to be Concentrated among Few Issuers in 2014,” (GAO-16-724) Sept. 6, 2016.** In this report, GAO describes: concentration in these markets in each state from 2011 through 2014 and changes in issuer participation in these markets in each state from 2013 to 2014. <http://www.gao.gov/assets/680/679500.pdf>

HILL HEARINGS

- The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee will hold a hearing on **Sept. 14, 2016**, to examine the future of the Department of Veterans Affairs, focusing on examining the Commission on Care report and the VA's response.

LEGISLATION

- **H.R.5932** (introduced Sept. 6, 2016) the Veterans Preventive Health Coverage Fairness Act was referred to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.
Sponsor: Representative Tammy Duckworth [D-IL-8]

MEETINGS

- The AUSA 2016 Annual Meeting & Exposition will be held **Oct. 3-5, 2016**, in Washington DC. <http://ausameetings.org/2016annualmeeting/>
- 2016 AMSUS Annual Continuing Education Meeting will be held on **Nov. 29- Dec. 2, 2016**, at the Gaylord National Harbor, Md. <http://www.amsusmeetings.org/>

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