



AMERICAN COUNSELING ASSOCIATION

June 26, 2007

The Honorable Greg Walden
U.S. House of Representatives
1210 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Walden:

I am writing on behalf of the approximately 40,000 members of the American Counseling Association (ACA), the nation's largest non-profit organization representing mental health counselors, to express our support for the "Health Care Access and Rural Equity (H-CARE) Act of 2007."

Your legislation takes a key step forward on Medicare's mental health benefit by establishing coverage for mental health services provided by state-licensed professional mental health counselors. This provision will increase the choice of mental health providers for Medicare beneficiaries, and improve their ability to access needed mental health services in their communities. This is especially crucial to rural beneficiaries who are often forced to travel long distances to find a mental health provider participating in the Medicare program. Rural communities have difficulty recruiting and retaining providers, and in many small towns, a licensed professional mental health counselor or a marriage and family therapist is the only mental health care provider in the area.

For this reason, an April, 2004 report by the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services recommended to the Secretary of Health and Human Services that Medicare be amended to cover mental health services when provided by licensed professional counselors and marriage and family therapists. There are over 103,000 professional mental health counselors licensed in 49 states and the District of Columbia, who meet education, training, and licensure standards on par with providers currently covered under Medicare. Expanding the Medicare benefit to include counselors will help beneficiaries living in rural areas get the care they need.

We applaud your leadership in introducing the Health Care Access and Rural Equity, H-CARE, Act of 2007, and believe its enactment is essential to providing rural Medicare beneficiaries the mental health services that they need. Please let us know if there is anything we can do to assist you in your work on this legislation.

Sincerely,

Marie A. Wakefield
President
American Counseling Association