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June 26, 2007

The Honorable Greg Walden
Co-Chair, House Rural Health Care Coalition
U.S. House of Representatives
1210 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative Walden:

I am writing on behalf of the American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA) to express our strong support for the Health Care Access and Rural Equity Act of 2007, legislation to address health care issues specific to rural areas. AMHCA is pleased that the bill once again includes a provision to provision to reimburse licensed mental health counselors in the Medicare program. As president of AMHCA and a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor (LCMHC), I commend you for introducing this important and much needed legislation.

AMHCA is the nation's largest professional organization exclusively representing the mental health counseling profession. Our members practice in a variety of settings, including hospitals, community mental health centers, managed behavioral health care organizations, employee assistance plans, substance abuse treatment centers, and private practice. Currently, there are more than 80,000 licensed or certified professional counselors practicing in the United States, including many in rural areas where access to mental health care is often scarce.

As you know, Medicare covers the services of independently practicing psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, clinical social workers, and clinical nurse specialists, but does not recognize mental health counselors or marriage and family therapists as separately reimbursable mental health providers. Specifically, the your legislation would correct this inequity by including mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists among the list of providers who can deliver mental health services to Medicare beneficiaries, provided they are legally authorized to deliver such care under state law. Enactment of this provision would increase access to and the availability of mental health services to Medicare beneficiaries, particularly for those seniors who reside in rural and underserved areas. The inclusion of mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists as Medicare providers would also afford beneficiaries greater choice among qualified providers.

Again, thank you for the leadership you have shown in introducing this legislation and for your commitment to ensuring greater access for seniors affected by mental illness. If I can be of assistance to you as you work towards the enactment of the bill, please feel free to contact me at 406-585-2485. Beth Powell, AMHCA's Director of Public Policy and Professional Issues, is also available to assist you and your staff at 703-548-6002, ext. 105.

Sincerely,



Gail Mears, PsyD, LCMHC, NCC
President

c: Ivan Frasier, President, Oregon Mental Health Counselors Association
Wayne Meyerowitz, AMHCA Western Region Director
W. Mark Hamilton, Ph.D., Executive Director and CEO