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Wyden, Barrasso Bill Will Improve Access to Mental Health Services for Seniors on Medicare

Lifts Restrictions for Health Counselors and Marriage/Family Therapists From Billing Medicare

Washington, D.C. – In an effort to close a workforce gap in mental health practitioners that leaves more than 77 million older Americans without adequate access to mental health treatment, U.S. Senators Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and John Barrasso (R-Wyo.) introduced the Seniors Mental Health Access Improvement Act legislation today that will lift some restrictions on Medicare reimbursement for Health Counselors and Marriage and Family Therapists.

“Mental health is an important part of battling chronic conditions and the needs of our senior community should not be overlooked,” Wyden said. **“Unfortunately, the current Medicare rules barring qualified mental health professionals from filing for reimbursement have left our seniors with woefully inadequate access to those professionals and have discouraged qualified counselors, and marriage and family therapists from hanging a shingle in some of the most underserved areas. This bill will go a long way toward closing that gap.”**

“In Wyoming, long distances and bad weather can make it tough to get medical care,” said Barrasso. **“Our rural communities face challenges in recruiting and retaining providers – particularly mental health professionals. My bill gives Medicare patients in rural communities greater access to mental health services as close to home as possible.”**

In the United States there are over 3,000 “mental health profession shortage areas” where seniors are unable to access adequate mental health professionals such as psychiatrists and psychologists. More than 50 percent of rural counties have no practicing mental health professionals. The bill lifts restrictions on mental health professionals that bar them from billing Medicare. This will increase access to existing mental health professionals and entice other professionals into locating in underserved areas.

In Oregon alone, this bill will allow more than 2,000 mental health professionals to begin accepting Medicare patients. Mental health professionals are already recognized by other government agencies such as the National Health Service Corp., the Veterans Administration and TRICARE.

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