

LPCS IN MEDICARE BILL PASSES HOUSE COMMITTEE!

The House Energy and Commerce Committee approved HR 945 in a historic vote supporting Medicare coverage for the counseling profession. The Mental Health Improvement Act will now head to the House floor for consideration.

While this legislation has passed both the House and Senate twice over the years, never before has the bill been voted on as a standalone measure rather than part of a broader package.

Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr's (D-NJ) opening remarks described HR 945 as "bipartisan legislation that would improve access to mental health providers in the Medicare program by covering mental health counselor and marriage and family therapist services."

The sponsors of HR 945, Congressmen Mike Thompson (D-CA) and John Katko (R-NY), fought hard to include the legislation in the markup. They worked closely with committee staff and Members to build support for passage.

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Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee Chairwoman Anna Eshoo (D-CA) also pushed for the bill, speaking on its behalf at the markup, calling it a “blessing” and stating that “passage is a priority to me.” The Committee reported the bill to the full House by voice vote. The future of HR 945 in this Congress is difficult to forecast. There are limited legislative workdays before Members leave for campaigning in October, although there is expected to be a post-election lame-duck session that may provide additional opportunity.

Further, a Senate calendar packed with COVID relief legislation and annual appropriations offers little room for movement of our Senate companion bill, S. 286. While the President’s signature cannot be guaranteed in the 116th Congress, this historic vote shouldn’t be underestimated. There remain paths for passage this year. Even if success is elusive, the Committee approval strengthens the chance for approval in the next Congress when mental health legislation is anticipated.

MMHCA was instrumental in making this giant leap

forward for the inclusion of counselors. James Blundo, MMHCA Executive Director and a member of the AMHCA Public Policy and Legislation Committee and Midwest Director on the AMHCA Board of Directors, worked along with Dr. Sara Sue Schaffer and Dr. Jeremy Norwood to gain support from three Michigan members of the US House of Representatives.

The three MI Reps from the Energy and Commerce Committee were contacted to request their support HR 945. US Reps Tim Walberg (MI-7), Fred Upton (MI-6), Debbie Dingell (MI-12), and Dan Kildee (MI-5) all considered our request to vote for the bill. It passed out of the Committee unanimously on Wednesday, September 9, 2020. David Bergman, Legislative Affairs Consultant for AMHCA, was extremely helpful to us in identifying and helping with talking points. This is a huge victory for counselors in Michigan and the 140,000 mental Health Counselors in the United States.

The struggle is far from over, but this is a great move forward. Please participate in the Call to Action

and thank Michigan's members of the Energy and Commerce Committee of the US House.

The MMHCA thanks all members and leaders who contacted your Representatives in support of HR 945. We wouldn't have been successful without your efforts and urge you to keep up the good work when we make our next push. We also encourage you to contact your Representatives, particularly our champions, to thank them for their support.

Rep. Katko released the following statement: "Statistics on mental health during the ongoing pandemic have been heartbreaking and underscore the need for Congressional action. A report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found that 43 percent of seniors experienced loneliness, and according to the CDC, 25 percent of young adults have contemplated suicide during this time.

To provide immediate support, I urge Congressional Leaders to swiftly bring my bipartisan legislation to the House floor. This bill will take meaningful steps to improve access to mental healthcare for seniors, at a time when these services are needed most."

Summary of the bill that includes Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs) can be found below:

HR 945, Mental Health Improvement Act: This legislation adds licensed mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists to Medicare's network of eligible service providers. Currently, these providers are not able to bill Medicare for their services, despite providing care to seniors and individuals with disabilities. Rep. Katko introduced the measure alongside US Rep. Mike Thompson (D, CA-05).