2014 Regulatory Blueprint for Action

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INTRODUCTION

The Regulatory Blueprint for Action identifies important regulatory issues for home care, hospice and home medical equipment providers. It provides a summary of each issue, including background information, recommendations, and rationale for the recommendations. This document provides a guide to the home care industry’s position on the issues addressed. The National Association for Home Care & Hospice (NAHC) 2014 Regulatory Blueprint for Action has been reviewed by the Government Affairs Committee and the Forum of State Associations’ Regulatory Affairs Advisory Committee, and has been approved by the Board of Directors.

In order to identify the regulatory issues that are of importance to home health and hospice providers throughout the country, NAHC engages in a variety of activities. Member comments gathered from telephone calls, letters, and personal contact are analyzed. The current industry trends and government actions are evaluated. NAHC publishes a list of major issues in the NAHC Report annually and asks members to score each issue from the least to most important. The results are tabulated and top industry priorities are identified.
I. REIMBURSEMENT REFORM
ESTABLISH PROCEDURES FOR TIMELY AND ACCURATE ADJUSTMENTS TO THE CASE-MIX SYSTEM THAT ADDRESS CHANGES IN PATIENT CHARACTERISTICS AND HOME HEALTH RESOURCES

ISSUE: Under the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, Congress mandated the creation of a Medicare home health prospective payment system (PPS). That system of PPS was implemented by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) on October 1, 2000. At that time, CMS was authorized to annually adjust payment rates solely through the use of a market basket index, which is intended to reflect cost inflation in the delivery of home health services. In addition, CMS is required to include a case-mix adjustment component to PPS to set payment rates in a manner that reflects the varying use of clinical resources among the population of patients receiving Medicare home health services.

Under the Medicare, Medicaid and SCHIP Benefits Improvement and Protection Act of 2000 (BIPA), CMS is authorized to make adjustments to the standard prospective payment amount if it is determined that the changes in the overall case mix result in a change in aggregate payments, whether the result of “upcoding” or classification in different units of service that do not reflect real changes in case-mix. In addition to this payment rate adjustment authority, CMS intends to regularly adjust the case-mix weights with system refinements based upon an expanded database.

On August 29, 2007, CMS published a final rule updating the PPS case-mix adjustor, effective January 1, 2008. This was the first update to the payment system since CMS implemented it on October 1, 2000. The update was made to improve CMS’ power to predict resource utilization, which had eroded to 20% since the start of PPS. In this update, the case-mix adjustor was established based on 2005 and first-quarter 2006 data. The data that was used reflects the resource use of care and supplies at that time.

A case-mix adjuster is used to distribute payments based on variations in patient care needs, as determined by a variety of characteristics. The design is to provide higher payments for patients with needs for higher levels of care, and lower payment for patients needing less care. Case-mix considerations include such variables as the health and functional status of the patients served. The final rule reforming PPS includes a case-mix adjuster with 153 case-mix groupings.

The revised case-mix system reallocates points for all clinical, functional, and service utilization items, expands the diagnoses considered, and allows for case-mix points for both primary and secondary diagnoses. In addition, it provides for payment increases at three therapy thresholds (6, 14, and 20 visits), as opposed to a single 10-visit threshold, and offers graduated payment increases for therapy visits between the thresholds. Another major change made is the assignment of different case-mix points and payment rates based on whether a patient is in an early (first or second) episode of care, or a late (third or after) episode of care. The result is a four-equation case-mix model that appears to offer more equitable payments based on actual resource utilization. CMS reported that the new case-mix system will have a resource utilization predictive rate of over 40%.

In 2011, CMS made changes to the case-mix system in order to address concerns about case-mix creep. This adjustment was due to the evaluation of 2008 and 2009 coding weight changes. CMS found that three-fourths of the coding increase was a result of increases in therapy visits above the 14 and 20 visit thresholds. CMS finalized significant changes in coding weights by eliminating hypertension as a factor in the calculation, reducing the weights on therapy episodes (2.5 percent reduction on 14+ visit episodes, and 5 percent reduction on 20+ visit episodes), and increasing weights on non-therapy episodes.

NAHC took issue with the therapy episode case-mix weight reductions as being purely arbitrary. Although CMS accepted NAHC’s recommendation to phase in the case-mix creep adjustment, applying a
3.79% adjustment in 2012 and reserving 1.32% for 2013, the rate reduction will impact individual providers unevenly. In addition, CMS plans to continue evaluating data for further case-mix adjustments to be applied to future payment updates.

Since the implementation of the 2008 adjuster, CMS began use of OASIS-C, which provides additional data on patient characteristics. CMS is studying how OASIS-C, which was implemented January 1, 2010, can serve in future changes to PPS case-mix.

The Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) is recommending that CMS replace the case mix adjustment model with a new version that drops therapy utilization from the variables applied to the payment determination. MedPAC views therapy thresholds as problematic, as they encourage unnecessary therapy utilization to increase payments. Through an outside contractor, MedPAC is developing a new adjuster that it expected would be ready for use in 2012. However, MedPAC has not yet brought forward a new adjuster, and has not provided a reason for the delay.

Concurrently, CMS is researching the development of case-mix adjuster reforms that also limit the impact of utilization thresholds. No details of the potential revisions are public at this point.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**
1. Conduct ongoing analysis of the adequacy of the case-mix adjustor with input from providers and case-mix study contractors.
2. Consider revisions that eliminate the use of the volume of therapy visits to determine payment amounts, while not discouraging medically necessary therapy services.
3. Test the 2012 changes and any future revised model prior to nationwide implementation.
4. Validate that a proposed new model performs better than the existing case-mix adjuster model.
5. Implement further refinements that would extend or increase the case-mix system reliability, in a timely manner, based on study findings.
6. Provide at least four months’ notice when making future adjustments to payment rates and the case-mix system.
7. Thoroughly analyze OASIS-C to ensure that the data is employed appropriately in future changes to the case-mix system.

**RATIONALE:** The revised case-mix adjuster established by CMS was based on data from 2005 and the first quarter of 2006, with the 2012 update based on data from 2009. Home health patient characteristics and resource utilization will continue to change over time. In addition, testing of the new case-mix adjustors will not be complete until in place for some time in home health agencies with real patients. The therapy utilization thresholds are a “lightning rod” for concerns about abuse, and objective clinical characteristics offer a higher integrity approach – provided that the explanatory power of the model fairly reflects variations in resource intensity.

Continued refinements should be used only if there is an increase in the models’ explanatory power capabilities. Research is needed into the impact of caregiver access and poverty on resource utilization, which was limited by CMS due to the political implications of inclusion of those items.
ESTABLISH PROCEDURES FOR ACCURATE ADJUSTMENTS TO THE CASE-MIX DIAGNOSES

ISSUE: The home health prospective payment system (HHPPS) uses a case-mix methodology to adjust payment rates based on characteristics of the patient and his or her corresponding resource needs. Agencies receive payment based on a patient profile that is determined by a comprehensive patient assessment, the Outcome and Assessment Information Set (OASIS), which assigns a case mix score to the patient that becomes part of the formula for determining a 60-day (episode) reimbursement amount. Diagnosis, clinical factors, functional factors, and service needs all factor into the patient’s case-mix score.

In 2000, when the HHPPS was implemented, home care agencies were reporting diagnoses on the OASIS that reflected the primary reason for home health; however, OASIS did not allow surgical codes, V-codes, or E-codes. This raised a problem for coding for OASIS diagnoses in cases where the aftercare for a diagnosis was the reason for home care admission. As a result, the agency, in accordance with OASIS instructions, was required to select a code for a condition that the patient no longer had. For example, on OASIS, it was correct to report lumbar intervertebral disc displacement (722.10) as the primary diagnosis in the case of a successful laminectomy, even if surgery has corrected the condition.

When the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) requirements were implemented, home health agencies were prohibited from reporting resolved conditions on a home health claim. For example, the agency can no longer report intervertebral disc displacement (722.10) as a primary or secondary diagnosis if the condition was resolved by surgery. The agency must report an aftercare code (V58) as the primary diagnosis. However, the HHPPS model was not changed to awarded points for V-codes. In 2003, the OASIS was modified to permit a case-mix diagnosis, which was replaced by a more accurate aftercare diagnosis (V-code), to be reported as a separate item on the OASIS. This allowed a resolved condition that was a case-mix diagnosis to receive points without being recorded on the claim. This item is referred to as the payment diagnosis field, and was added so agencies could comply with ICD-9 and HIPAA coding requirements without losing points towards their case-mix score.

In 2008, CMS made significant refinements to HHPPS payment model. One of those changes was an expanded list of diagnosis and comorbidities that could receive case-mix points. In addition, a few V-codes (V55) were included as case-mix diagnoses and awarded points directly, but the number of aftercare codes that could be paired with a case mix diagnosis was limited. The payment diagnosis concept remained, however, whereby agencies would need to record a case-mix diagnosis as a separate OASIS item if that diagnosis were replaced by an aftercare diagnosis.

In the 2013 final rule for the HHPPS rate update, CMS has further restricted the diagnosis codes that can be reported as a case-mix diagnosis in the payment diagnosis field to only fracture codes. This change eliminates many diagnoses that could have received case-mix points prior to the 2013 rule. CMS maintains that agencies have been out of compliance with ICD-9 guidelines and are inappropriately recording diagnoses in the payment diagnosis field for which points have been awarded. In addition, CMS stated that case mix points should not be awarded for resolved conditions since they do not contribute to resource utilization.

Further, In the 2014 final rule for the HHPPS rate update, CMS eliminated 170 diagnosis claiming that all of the conditions will have been less acute or resolved prior to a home health admission (category 1), or the condition would not impact the HH POC or result in additional resource utilization (category 2). The home health industry disagrees with CMS’ assertion that agencies have been out of compliance with coding rules when reporting case-mix diagnoses and should continue to be awarded case-mix points for
these diagnoses. Many of the conditions that are included in the HHPPS case mix methodology will be resolved when the patient is admitted for home health services. CMS was aware of this when they chose to use the OASIS assessment for case-mix scoring for the HHPPS. The care agencies provide related to these diagnoses was calculated in the original case-mix model to account for resource utilization. The reason agencies have received case-mix points for resolved conditions is because of how the HHPPS model was developed, and not because of non-compliance with ICD-9 coding rules. The rationale for introducing the payment diagnosis field was to permit agencies to report and receive points for these case-mix diagnoses where ICD-9 and HIPAA requirements prohibited their use on home health claims. CMS seems to be backtracking on its original instructions for selection and reporting of case-mix diagnoses. This change in the payment model could have a significant impact on reimbursement for providers.

The industry also disagrees with that assertion that all of the diagnoses selected for elimination in the 2014 final rule are too acute for home health or do not reflect high resource utilization. There are many diagnoses codes selected for elimination that are appropriate for the home health setting and should remain in the HHPPS Grouper

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. CMS should conduct a thorough analysis and review of clinical literature to be better informed on which ICD-9 codes are appropriate to eliminate from the HHPPS. In addition, any ICD-9 code CMS eliminates that results in a loss of case mix points should be applied in a budget neutral manner
2. Revise the HHPPS model to include additional V-code and E-code diagnoses as case-mix diagnosis to align HIPAA, OASIS, and HHPPS requirements.

RATIONALE: Medicare reimbursement to home health agencies continues to decrease through various mechanisms, particularly through the case-mix “creep” adjustment. Eliminating the number of case-mix diagnoses is another form of adjusting rates related to the case-mix methodology, and should be considered in relation to any further rate adjustments for case mix “creep” and rebasing that are already in place. Without a more in-depth analysis, the impact of this adjustment to the case-mix diagnoses could be greater than CMS has stated. In addition, CMS’ rationale to restrict the diagnosis codes that can be reported in the payment diagnosis field to only fracture codes is spurious.
MONITOR AND REFINE MEDICARE HOME HEALTH OUTLIER POLICY

ISSUE: Medicare law requires that the home health prospective payment system (HHPPS) include a component for outlier payments, with 5% of the anticipated expenditures allocated to an outlier budget. In implementing this mandate, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) created an outlier payment methodology that includes shared losses with the provider of services through the use of an eligibility threshold and percentage payment on costs above that eligibility threshold. CMS analysis of outlier payments has shown that only a portion of the outlier budget was actually being spent each year since the inception of HHPPS.

Between 2005 and 2009, the amount of outlier spending increased considerably. During that time almost 40% of the outlier outlays were to one county in the country. As a result, CMS became concerned that outlier spending would exceed budget. CMS raised the fixed dollar loss ratio (FDL), effective January 1, 2008, from 0.67 to 0.89 with the intention of decreasing the number of episodes that will qualify for outlier payments.

In 2010, CMS promulgated new outlier policy designed to stem what it perceived to be abusive use of outliers in certain parts of the country. At the time, NAHC had been advocating for an agency-specific cap on outlier payment of 10%. CMS implemented such a cap beginning January 1, 2010, and applied the cap through rolling adjustments on claims payments designed to result in an end-of-year limitation of no more than 10% of Medicare home healthy revenue relating to outlier payments. CMS also returned the fixed dollar loss ratio to 0.67, thereby applying outliers to a larger patient segment.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) codified the outlier cap into Medicare law beginning January 1, 2011, removing section 1895(b)(5) of the Act so that estimated total outlier payments in a given fiscal year (FY) or years may not exceed 2.5% of total payments projected or estimated. The provision also makes permanent a 10% agency-level outlier payment cap. CMS implemented these new legislation requirements in 2011.

Since the implementation of the outlier cap, some concerns have been raised that certain patients may find barriers to access to care, as outlier patients are not always evenly distributed. Section 3131(d)(1)(A)(iii) of the ACA requires the Secretary to analyze potential revisions to outlier payments to better reflect costs of treating Medicare beneficiaries with high levels of severity of illness. CMS must deliver a Report to Congress regarding the results and recommendations of a home health study no later than March 1, 2014.

Outlier calculation problems surfaced in 2010 and continued into 2012, resulting in inappropriate withholding of payments to home health agencies. These problems are due to an error in the Medicare home health claims processing systems, leaving providers of outlier services underpaid by tens of thousands of dollars for the past two years. CMS acknowledged the system errors, and after several failed attempts, eventually installed a “fix” in the middle of 2012. However, CMS stated that they do not intend to apply interest to any overdue payments related to the outlier claims processing issue. It remains to be seen whether further calculations difficulties will occur with 2013 and 2014 outlier claims.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Monitor the outlier payment methodology to determine whether qualified patients have barriers to access to care; if barriers are found to exist, develop revisions to outlier standards that accommodate exceptional circumstances (e.g. use of an exceptions process and prior authorization);
2. Where the full allocated outlier budget is not utilized, CMS could make retrospective payments to providers with excess outlier subject to a pre-stated limit; and
3. Interest payments should be made on all outlier claims not paid within the 30-day required timeline.

RATIONALE: The hard cap on outlier spending was needed to address a unique abusive practice. With that practice essentially eliminated, CMS should determine what refinements may be needed to provided outlier payment support to HHAs that exceed the 10% cap while still providing appropriate care to its patient population. The cap should be viewed as a radical but short-term remedy rather than one that disqualifies patients in need without consideration of their needs.

Failure to process outlier payments to which providers are entitled could negatively impact access to care for Medicare beneficiaries with the greatest need for services. Home health agencies should be appropriately compensated for care provided and not placed in financial jeopardy because of claims processing failures.
IMPROVE APPLICATION OF WAGE INDEX FOR
MEDICARE HOME HEALTH AND HOSPICE

ISSUE: Since the inception of the Medicare per-visit cost limits, home health payment rates have been adjusted to reflect varying wage levels across the nation through the application of a wage index. This payment rate adjustment continues under the Medicare home health prospective payment system (HHPPS), which was implemented effective October 1, 2000. However, the wage index that has been utilized by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has been based upon varying wages within hospitals across the nation. The hospice benefit payment is also adjusted by the same hospital wage index, with a further adjustment known as the Budget Neutrality Factor (the BNAF is being phased out over fiscal years 2010 through 2015). The hospital index is derived from data that explicitly excludes any home health services costs. Furthermore, it is based on the mix of employees found in hospitals, rather than home health agencies and hospices. In addition, providers have seen wide swings in their wage index from one year to the next. An attempt some years back to create and utilize a home care-specific wage index failed due to the unavailability of reliable wage data.

While the home health and hospice payment rates are based upon the application of a hospital wage index, both the index utilized and its manner of application are significantly distinct from that utilized relative to hospital services payment rates. Hospitals may secure a geographic reclassification for application of the wage index by establishing that the particular hospital draws on an employment pool different from the geographical area to which it would otherwise be assigned for its wage index level. Home health agencies and hospices are not authorized to secure a wage index reclassification. As a result, a hospital may compete for the same health care employees as a hospice or home health agency, but be approved for a relatively higher payment rate through the wage index reclassification. Congress has established specific wage index criteria for certain geographic locations. However, these criteria apply only to hospitals that are also protected from wide variations from one year to the next by establishment of a floor.

The Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) recommended that Medicare replace the hospital wage index with one that relies on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and design the new wage index in a manner that allows for tailoring to other provider sectors, including home health and hospice.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) directs CMS to reform the hospital wage index consistent with the recommendations of MedPAC, and to report to Congress on its plan for instituting a new wage index. CMS submitted its report on a commuting-based wage index (CBWI) to Congress in April, 2012; however, the report indicates that the complexities of applying the proposed wage index to providers whose payment varies based on the location where services are delivered would be prohibitive.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should conduct further study to determine a wage index approach that can be most equitably applied to all Medicare providers – the goal should be to put all providers on a level playing field with their respective wage indexes. If the revised wage index allows for geographic reclassifications for one provider group, it should provide the same allowance for all. Any wage index weight changes in a reformed model, or in future years in applying the wage index model, should be subject to a transition limitation on increases and decreases from one year to the next.

RATIONALE: The current hospital wage index does not fairly reflect variations in wages in home health and hospice. In today’s health care environment, health care providers of all types compete for employment of the same personnel. The adjustment of Medicare payment rates intended to reflect variations in wages across the nation should be consistent across all provider types. With increasing
shortages of health care personnel, unequal wage index adjustments for health care providers in the same geographic region results in an uneven and discriminatory distribution of the employment pool of personnel. Prevention of wide swings in wage indexes will enable health care providers to more precisely project revenue and budget expenses.
PROVIDE FAIR AND TARGETED REIMBURSEMENT FOR MEDICAL SUPPLIES

ISSUE: In implementing the home health prospective payment system (HHPPS) for Medicare home health services, CMS significantly modified the responsibilities of home health agencies for providing medical supplies to individuals receiving care under the Medicare home health benefit. Under the previous payment system, the provision of medical supplies by home health agencies was not required. Provision of non-routine medical supplies and covered medical supplies was optional and limited to those non-routine supplies that were ordered as part of the plan of care. Under HHPPS, home health agencies must provide all supplies.

In the 2008 reform of HHPPS, CMS established separate payment for medical supplies in each full episode, with the amount of payment based on certain patient characteristics. However, additional supply payments are not allowed for low utilization payment adjustments (LUPA) episodes. Payment rates are tied to a six-level severity index. The decision to pay separately for supplies using a new medical supply case-mix adjustor, rather than by adding a set dollar amount to every episode, came about because the CMS HHPPS research identified that only 10% of home health claims included charges for medical supplies.

Policies and billing procedures were established to require home health agencies to report billing codes to correlate to the case mix level, whether or not supplies are provided. Claims must reflect supply charges in cases where supplies are provided. It will not be clear whether the supply case-mix is appropriate until supply charge and payment data are analyzed.

Despite the move to establish a more equitable payment methodology for supplies, concern remains that the amount of money allotted for medical supplies will not be adequate. The amount of money allocated for medical supplies is based on pre-HHPPS data. Large numbers of home health agencies (HHAs) did not provide supplies pre-HHPPS, and Part B files did not account for supply costs for beneficiaries who did not have Medicare B coverage. Furthermore, many required supplies under HHPPS were not included in the payment calculation since the Medicare B supply benefit guidelines are more restrictive than those for home health. CMS did not build in inflationary considerations for new, high-cost supplies such as those needed for chest drainage and complex wound care. Finally, many HHAs admit that they failed to include charges for supplies on claims because payment was not affected by the inclusion of supply charges until the change in 2008.

The final rule for the HHPPS rate update for 2014 reduces the medical supply adjuster for non-routine supplies by 2.83% for each year from 2014-2017 adding even greater inequality for supply reimbursement.

Because HHAs must provide all supplies while a beneficiary is under a home health plan of care, regardless of whether those supplies are part of the treatment plan, some patients are forced to accept different brands of supplies than those to which they are accustomed. In addition, they are required to interrupt relations they have had with their suppliers or pay out of their pockets for their supplies while under a home health plan of care.

CMS and MedPAC are now working to devise reforms to the case-mix adjustment model; however, there is no indication that either effort includes modifications to the medical supply element of home health services.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Monitor the new policy for unbundled payment of non-routine supplies from the episodic payment rate;
2. Identify costs of supplies provided for which payment is inadequate because of failure of the supply case-mix adjustor to identify certain conditions routinely requiring supplies;
3. Study the fairness of the payment rates found in the six-tier severity scale;
4. Make timely adjustments to the medical supply case-mix to provide accurate payment based on findings;
5. Develop an outlier payment mechanism for high-cost medical supplies;
6. Modify the HHPPS standard to require that HHAs provide only those medical supplies that are directly related to the treatment provided by the HHA to the patient;
7. Allow individuals to receive Medicare B payment for supplies that are not ordered as part of the plan of care from their supplier of choice, with appropriate Medicare reimbursement under Medicare Part B;
8. Analyze the cost of medical supplies provided and determine whether a supply add-on is appropriate in LUPA episodes; and
9. Include appropriate medical supply case-mix adjuster revisions in any reformed service model.

RATIONALE: HHAs have an expanded responsibility for medical supplies, the true costs of which have not been captured and reflected in the episodic payment rate. Unbundling supplies as put forth in the new policy could ensure appropriate payment to HHAs. However, poor data resulting from HHAs’ failure to include supply charges on claims may have resulted in incorrect conclusions about supply needs, patient characteristics, and costs. The new supply case-mix system, which was developed based on incomplete data, could be seriously flawed and the payment amount inadequate. Furthermore, because CMS failed to acknowledge the limit on coverage of supplies used by patients and their caretakers and failed to project added costs of new technologies, the Medicare benefit has been unfairly expanded on the backs of HHAs. Finally, patient choice of supplies and suppliers should be taken into consideration in CMS payment policy. Many LUPA episodes, such as those for catheter changes, require the home health clinician to use costly supplies in the course of care. Often patients in LUPA episodes have the need for other supplies that must be provided by HHAs due to the bundled supply requirements.
ELIMINATE INEQUITIES IN PARTIAL EPISODE PAYMENTS

ISSUE: The implementation of a prospective payment system by CMS included the provision of partial payment in circumstances where the patient either (a) is discharged and readmitted, or (b) elects to transfer to another home health agency during an episode, as a disincentive to premature discharge from care. The partial episode payment (PEP) adjustments prorate the PPS episodic payment based on the number of days a patient is served between the first and last billable visit in relation to the 60-day episode. As a result of this interpretation, there are payment gaps that inequitably reduce the level of payment.

Current CMS policy and Medicare administrative contractors (MAC) actions in cases where two agencies bill for services provided within a 60-day period of time are confusing. CMS policy identifies the home health agency of record as the “primary agency.” The primary agency is responsible for provision of all bundled services to the home health patient. However, in cases where a second agency bills for home health services, CMS has instructed its contractors to assume that this constitutes a “beneficiary elected transfer” resulting in a PEP of the first agency’s episode. CMS failed to allow for exceptions to the policy, such as partial episodes due to relocation of Medicare beneficiaries during disasters.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. CMS should eliminate the payment gaps or carve-outs under its current interpretation of PEP payments.
2. Full-episode payments should be made when readmissions or beneficiary-elected transfers occur for conditions unrelated to the initial reason for care.
3. If readmission or transfer is required for the same condition, partial-episode payments should be prorated based on the total number of days out of 60, from the start of care or first day of the episode through the day prior to the date the patient was readmitted or came under the care of the second home health agency.
4. Fair and equitable policies and protocols should be established for providers to follow to avoid PEP episodes and conflicts when determining “primary agency.”
5. Exceptions should be allowed to the PEP policy when home health patients require services after relocation during declared disasters.

RATIONALE: The use of a PEP adjustment is inconsistent with the manner in which CMS calculated average episode costs. CMS originally envisioned HHPPS as a system under which an agency would be paid prospectively for 60 days of care, regardless of the actual number of visits made during that episode. Under the current interpretation, CMS has chosen to carve out the days in between billable visits when paying for a partial episode. However, if there is no transfer or readmission, the agency receives a full episodic payment without the carve-outs, regardless of the length of stay. Providers should not be penalized when patients require treatment for a new condition unrelated to the original reason for care within a 60-day period. Reimbursement in this manner is more characteristic of per-visit payment rather than per-episode. Unclear and conflicting policies and practices result in conflict and unfair payment reductions.

HHPPS should not exclude portions of episodic payment where there is a gap between intervening events since the nature of home care is the provision of part-time or intermittent care. A patient is under a home health plan of care for the duration of the treatment plan. PEP episodes when patients receive services after relocation due to a disaster compounds the agency’s financial losses.
REIMBURSE HOME HEALTH AGENCIES AND HOSPICES FOR TELEHEALTH
AND PROVIDE FOR REGULATORY FLEXIBILITY

ISSUE: Interest in the concept of delivering home health and hospice services via telehealth (also known as telemedicine) has grown over the last few years. Quality Improvement Organizations (QIO) were charged in the 8th Scope of Work by CMS with urging and assisting home health agencies in the use of telehealth services, particularly as a tool in their efforts to reduce hospitalizations. The 2007 Home Health National Quality Improvement Campaign that was sponsored by CMS and the QIOs included telehealth as one of the twelve monthly best practices because of growing reports of greatly improved outcomes of care by home health agencies using telehealth. The 2011 Home Health Quality Improvement National Campaign included information on the benefits of telehealth in reducing hospitalization rates of home health patients. The use of telehealth has proven beneficial to hospice patients and their families, providing them with added security while allowing hospices to provide additional oversight of patients at a lower cost than additional home visits would require.

In December, 2000, Congress passed the Medicare, Medicaid and SCHIP Benefits Improvement and Protection Act (BIPA) which contained a telehealth provision for home health. This provision clarified that HHAs should not be prevented from providing telehealth services. However, BIPA reinforced that such services do not substitute for “in-person” home health services ordered by a physician, and are not considered “visits” for purposes of eligibility or payment.

Current Medicare home health regulations are limited to services provided as “visits.” There is no separate payment mechanism for telehealth services under the Medicare home health despite the fact that home health agencies are required to comply with the conditions of participation regardless of the payer. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has no current plans to extend the Medicare home health benefits to specifically include telehealth services. Under PPS, home health providers may look to telehealth as a possible mechanism to deliver services.

Telehealth services are not reported on home health or hospice claims. Telehealth services must be reported as non-allowable costs on Medicare cost reports. CMS plans to analyze telehealth cost report information in order to evaluate the use and cost of telehealth services. It is not known whether telehealth will be considered an allowable expense for future home health cost reports after CMS reviews costs and revises payment rates. At this time, limited reimbursement is available from Medicaid, managed care plans and private insurance for telehealth services. A few demonstrations are under way in rural areas.

Currently, the cost of telehealth equipment and transmission of information can be prohibitive. Obstacles to the growth of telehealth services in home health and hospice include geographic practice limitations imposed by state professional licensure laws and liability laws. Furthermore, CMS requirements to apply the conditions of participation (CoPs) to all individuals under the care of home health agencies (regardless of payer) creates a disincentive for home health agencies to use telehealth services for monitoring of stable individuals.

Congressional efforts have been undertaken to improve the status of telehealth within Medicare. However, to date the enacted legislation has not affected home telehealth services or telehealth within the home health and hospice benefits. Nevertheless, there are steps that CMS can take to address telehealth within Medicare without further congressional authorization needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Expand telehealth demonstration projects to include home health and hospice services to Medicare beneficiaries to identify potential cost-savings to the Medicare program, appropriate patients, and the quality and effectiveness of telehealth services.
2. Develop payment mechanisms to reimburse home health agencies and hospices for equipment costs.
3. Recognize telehealth service as billable under home health PPS based on a discrete number of telehealth services per episode and consider telehealth costs as allowable for cost reporting purposes.
4. Include telehealth equipment and service delivery as allowable costs on home health and hospice cost reports.
5. Consult with industry representatives and develop guidelines under the current Conditions of Participation (CoP) to allow for telehealth services delivered by providers.
6. Do not apply CoP requirements in instances where telehealth is used solely for monitoring stable individuals when Medicare is not the payer.

RATIONALE: Home health and hospice providers foresee application of telehealth as a means to improve quality and efficiency in the delivery of care in the home, provide greater access to specialists, and produce cost savings for specific types of patients. Telehealth has been identified as a best practice that leads to reduced hospitalization by providers participating in quality improvement initiatives with their Quality Improvement Organizations (QIO). Non-traditional services should be recognized and their use encouraged in the home care arena. CMS and the home health and hospice industries need data from claims, cost reports, quality reporting, and demonstration projects to support the expansion of telehealth services for the care of patients in the home, to justify expenditures, and ensure appropriate quality of care. Preliminary research results have demonstrated that telehealth results in cost-savings, prevent and shorten hospital stays, and improve patient outcomes and patient satisfaction. However, to ensure expanded use of telehealth in home care, regulatory burdens must be minimized and payment must be guaranteed.
ENSURE USE OF STATISTICALLY VALID SAMPLING METHODOLOGY FOR MEDICAL REVIEW

ISSUE: Since July, 1992, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has considered incorporating a revised sampling procedure for post-payment and audit reviews of Medicare claims. In 1999, CMS introduced a revised sampling procedure. The use of sampling procedures involves the MAC identifying a specific type of claim submitted for a specified period of time. The denial rate in the sample is extrapolated to all similar claim types for the period, resulting in denial of claims that were never reviewed individually. The validity of currently available sampling procedures has been questioned not only by providers but also by at least one CMS Region Office.

Congress limited the authorization to use sample adjudication and outcome extrapolation to circumstances where there is evidence of fraud or when efforts to correct a provider’s misapplication of coverage standards through individual claim reviews and education have failed. However, CMS has not controlled the use of sampling in conformance with the congressional limitation, as Medicare contractors have extrapolated claims reviews to the universe of claims in a period of time without regard to a provider’s claim compliance history. When these actions are subject to administrative review, the vast majority of claim denials are reversed, but only after providers have incurred great expense. The decision to apply sample adjudication is not subject to administrative review in an appeal.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should strictly oversee the use of sampling and should prohibit all contractors from using sampling without specific authorization from CMS. In addition, CMS should:

1. Stop sampling until, and if, a valid methodology is identified.
2. Ensure statistically valid sampling procedures and overpayment methodology.
3. Refrain from extrapolating the denial rate to the entire population of claims submitted during that period of time until all appeals of the claims actually reviewed and denied have been exhausted.
4. Improve educational programs for providers and establish guidelines for minimum training of all Medicare contractor reviewers.
5. Expand contractor provider relations, services, and education to reduce claim errors.
6. Implement a time-limited prepay review.
7. Apply sampling to the population only after all appeals have been exhausted by the provider.
8. Require repayment only after all appeal rights are exhausted.
9. Develop criteria and standards for the exclusion from the program of providers that have a history or pattern of submitting claims for non-covered services after education has been provided.

RATIONALE: Sampling imposes significant risk of bankruptcy to agencies and reduces the protection available in an appeal. Even if CMS can develop a valid sampling methodology, extrapolation of denial rates to a large percentage of claims, with recovery of funds before appeals have been exhausted, is unfair to agencies and patients. If sampling is used by CMS, safeguards as recommended are essential.
ENSURE HOME CARE SERVICES UNDER MANAGED CARE

ISSUE: The Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003 increased payment to Medicare Advantage plans to encourage more beneficiaries to leave traditional Medicare and join private HMO and PPO plans. In addition, the Part D Medicare prescription drug plan has created policies that result in the automatic enrollment of special needs Medicaid enrollees into Medicare managed care plans. The Medicare plans have an obligation to provide the same scope of home health services as is available under traditional Medicare by agencies that meet Medicare quality standards. However, these plans have often covered home health services on a “per visit” basis while traditional Medicare covers episodic care. Further, some Medicare Advantage plans impose significant cost-sharing obligations on enrollees, while Medicare has no coinsurance requirements for home health services.

Managed care programs enrolling Medicare beneficiaries have been known to engage in questionable marketing practices, particularly in conjunction with marketing Part D prescription drug plans. These result in patients being unaware of their enrollment. Beneficiaries who wish to dis-enroll are faced with burdensome procedural requirements and delayed transfer back to fee-for-service Medicare.

Timely information is not available in the Common Working File (CWF) and home care providers have difficulty obtaining reimbursement for patients served when the patient did not inform them of their Medicare Advantage enrollment. Despite limitations on services and payments, Medicare certified providers are still responsible for meeting quality standards as outlined in the Medicare Conditions of Participation (CoPs).

In 2010, traditional Medicare began to compete against private plans in six metropolitan areas in demonstration projects. In addition, in its efforts to control costs, CMS announced establishment of multistate Medicare Preferred Provider Organizations (PPO) and several Disease Management projects. These new plans will have greater flexibility in the delivery of services to Medicare beneficiaries. However, many of the problems inherent in managed care could arise within these new plans, since they will have increased flexibility in coverage requirements, with potential for limiting home health and hospice benefits.

Some non-Medicare, federally-qualified managed care plans have restricted the home care benefit for subscribers by limiting visits to a bare minimum and applying a “part-time or intermittent” care limitation. These plans have taken the position that home care services for enrolled patients are limited to nursing care, thereby excluding home care aide services, therapy, and medical social services and supplies. Others have used the “custodial care” exclusion to limit payment. Medicaid plans have begun to restrict services, and have forced patients to receive nursing and aide services under waiver programs that do not impose the quality controls required of Medicaid providers.

Medicaid managed care enrollment increased from 56% to 74% of the total Medicaid enrollees. Currently, eligibility varies greatly by state. In many cases, Medicaid recipients will be required by their states to enroll in managed-care plans. There is “tremendous variation” among plans. This further impinges on the ability of home health agencies to deliver needed care and be paid for care delivered. Even before the 2014 expansion of Medicaid enrollment occurs, cash-strapped states, hoping to control costs, are increasingly requiring Medicaid recipients to leave the traditional program and enroll in managed-care plans.

Managed care providers that are not federally qualified are also providing coverage in a restrictive manner. No federal laws govern these providers, and the state laws that do exist are inadequate in their definition of home care and coverage of services. Also, increasing reports are being received from home
health agencies, indicating that despite contracts and prior authorization of services, managed care plans are not paying for services provided.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Enforce laws that mandate that federally-qualified managed care plans must provide home care services to the non-Medicare subscriber without limit as to frequency or duration (up to 24 hours a day, 7 days a week), where delivery of home care services represents a cost-effective and reimbursable service meeting the client’s needs.

2. Require managed care plans and preferred provider organizations serving Medicare beneficiaries to provide home care services consistent with the coverage guidelines (specifically, the plans should cover episodic care).

3. Require Medicare and Medicaid managed care plans and preferred provider organizations to notify patients and their current providers of authorization of service requirements prior to the effective date of enrollment.

4. Require immediate notification of the HIPAA Eligibility Transaction System (HETS) by managed care plans and preferred provider organizations of Medicare fee-for-service enrollment and disenrollment, and improve the timing for updating HETS by CMS.

5. Clarify state laws regulating managed care plans and preferred provider organizations.

6. Establish an appropriate policy to encompass all disciplines of care, supplies, and HME within a definition of “home health services,” and develop a reasonable definition of “custodial care.”

7. “Hold harmless” providers, who in good faith provide physician-ordered, reasonable and necessary home health services to beneficiaries before notification of enrollment.

8. Ensure that preferred provider organizations and disease management programs assure access, adequacy of coverage and quality care.

9. Impose penalties on managed care organizations that fail to pay for authorized services in a timely manner to providers that meet quality requirements imposed in regulation.

10. Enforce PFFS statutory and regulatory requirements to implement revised provider payment schedules on the same date that such changes are required of contractors administering the original Medicare benefit consistent with 42 CFR 422.503.

11. Ensure that Medicare and Medicaid managed care plans offer services through home health agencies that meet the Medicare conditions of participation.

RATIONALE: Failure to require managed care plans to become federally qualified results in dual standards. Also, it is unfair to Medicare beneficiaries enrolled in managed care plans that limit the amount of home health service and impose co-pays and/or fail to authorize care. Further, different levels of benefits will result if new insurance models, such as preferred provider organizations and disease management programs, are not held to the same standards or required to ensure access to home health. Finally, home health agencies unfairly suffered, and will continue to suffer, serious financial problems caused by inadequate communication of beneficiary enrollment in these plans and failure of plans to pay for service provided.
ENSURE ACCESS TO MEDICAID HOME CARE SERVICES

ISSUE: Medicaid is the safety net to protect the poor. Generally, the Medicaid home care need is increasing, while available funding is decreasing. In many states, Medicaid rates for home health service and supplies are so poor that agencies cannot cover their costs, even after substantial subsidization from other payers. Budget problems in most of the states are leading to the initiation of payment rate and scope of coverage restrictions, as well as the imposition of co-pays on home care. The result is that access to home care is limited by the rates and by the reduction in benefits. Cost cutting is further encouraged by CMS through adoption of consumer-directed care programs in place of traditional home care services – programs that operate with few regulatory requirements and little oversight. While this is happening, compliance demands are increasing on Medicaid providers with the imposition of Medicare Conditions of Participation (CoPs), especially OASIS requirements.

Another cost-saving action taken by states is contracting with managed care organizations to manage all care provided to Medicaid clients, often resulting in even more limitations on home care services and payment rates. This has led to creation of a care dilemma for home care providers when faced with patients who have continuing needs beyond their benefit limit.

State associations indicate that multiple, state-specific reasons exist for the problems patients have in accessing home care services. States rarely use an objective and rational approach to rate-setting design. Some Medicaid programs operate with unwritten or incomplete coverage standards, thereby subjecting agencies and their patients to arbitrary coverage denials, the application of invalid sampling methodologies, and restricted appeals processes. NAHC has intervened in numerous state battles with Medicaid to improve rate-setting methodologies and the scope of home care benefits. To date, many of these efforts have been successful, but problems continue to arise in other states.

Currently, CMS is becoming more active in managing Medicaid compliance by the states. CMS recently reminded the states that a homebound requirement is not permitted under the Medicaid home health services benefit. In addition, CMS is pushing for better rebalancing of long term care spending in favor of home care. CMS recently published a Federal Register notice addressing new Medicaid federal rules on such topics as rate-setting standards. However, this notice included certain statements that could have a negative impact on payment to providers.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Establish accountability and program integrity standards in Medicaid home care.
2. Develop appropriate rate-setting structures for use within the individual state Medicaid programs.
3. Enforce federal Medicaid law that requires states to set rates in a manner that secures access to necessary care and quality.
5. Prohibit co-payment requirements.
6. Ensure that home health is included in every state Medicaid benefit package if block grants are established.
7. Address service and payment rate requirements that must be followed by managed care organizations serving Medicaid clients.
8. Ensure comprehensive reform of Medicaid home care consistent with the Olmstead decision.
9. Ensure compliance with the elimination of the homebound requirement at the state level.
10. Require that minimum standards be established for consumer-directed care programs.
11. Prohibit Medicaid from restricting coverage to a consumer-directed care model.

RATIONALE: Medicaid, in many instances, is the payer of last resort. The multiple barriers to access, due to low reimbursement rates, increased cost due to compliance demands, and a poorly designed
benefit, inhibit home health agencies in providing care to the needy. Co-payments create increased administrative costs, bad debts, and an indirect reduction in reimbursement to the agency. State Medicaid agencies that impose homebound requirements are in violation of federal law.

Although consumer-directed care is ideal for some individuals, primarily young disabled persons, it should not be forced upon those unwilling and/or unable to direct their own care as a means for states to save Medicaid dollars.

Responding to the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Olmstead*, CMS issued guidance to the states to take steps to provide alternatives to institutional care for the disabled, as mandated by the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Olmstead* with home care as the central focus of CMS’ actions. While there have been positive signs that the institutional bias of Medicaid is weakening, home care access has a long way to go.
PROMOTE MEDICARE-MEDICAID COORDINATION

ISSUE: Some patients are dually eligible for Medicare and Medicaid benefits. Their coverage may alternate between Medicare and Medicaid due to a change in their condition and the need for skilled services. Medicare is considered primary to Medicaid, so some Medicaid programs require a Medicare denial before making payment. Current CMS regulations require that third-party liability recovery programs demonstrate cost effectiveness and that liability be established to the third party prior to recovery from the provider.

In response to growing national concerns about the lack of coordination between Medicare and Medicaid for dually eligible persons, Section 2602 of the Affordable Care Act mandated the formation of the Federal Coordinated Healthcare Office. This office functions under the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) “to make sure dual eligible beneficiaries have full access to seamless, high quality healthcare and to make the system as cost-effective as possible.” The Medicare-Medicaid Coordination Office works with the Medicaid and Medicare programs, across federal agencies, states and stakeholders to align and coordinate benefits between the two programs, partnering with states to develop new care models and improve the way the dually eligible get health care.

It is the belief of the state Medicaid programs that Medicaid has incorrectly made payment on behalf of patients who were eligible for Medicare coverage. Medicaid programs across the nation have initiated projects designed to recover payments made for services to patients who are dually enrolled in both the Medicare and Medicaid programs. Others are requiring a formal Medicare claim determination before processing a Medicaid bill. In addition, some states are taking a hard line against Medicaid payment for any services rendered during any part of the 60-day period that includes some Medicare coverage of home health services. This position is taken even when the Medicaid claim concerns services after the close of Medicare coverage or when necessary care is provided beyond Medicare’s scope of benefits.

Significant costs to providers, Medicare, and Medicaid are incurred because these projects require retrospective claims review, submission of claims to Medicare, and administrative appeals. Further, the unsupportable position that Medicare covers everything in the home for each day of the 60-day episode leaves providers with unpaid services.

Problems exist with the demand bill process, sometimes taking three to four months when the payer (e.g., Medicaid) requires billing in a shorter time. Agencies have to bill without the Medicare denial, get rejected, and re-bill when the Medicare denial is received. This costs agencies considerable dollars. Some programs have required billing to Medicare for services clearly not covered (e.g., personal care only, housekeeping).

States have returned to individual claim submissions and appeals since the end of the sampling demonstration programs. This has led to high administrative costs and never-ending confusion. Additional states from the original ones pursuing Medicare-maximization are now instituting recovery programs or other barriers to Medicaid payment for dual-eligible patients.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Federal Coordinated Healthcare Office of CMS should take on the following work in pursuit of its goals to ensure Medicare-Medicaid coordination:

1. Modify third-party liability regulations to require that states utilize the most cost-effective method for recovering payment for dually eligible patients.
2. Implement a system of claims review that does not require individual claims submissions and appeals. Medicare and Medicaid claims submission should be combined with initial billing to Medicare and a transfer billing of remaining non-covered care to the respective state Medicaid program.
3. Require states to recoup incorrect payments from the Medicare program rather than the provider. No recovery should take place against a provider until after third party (Medicare’s) liability is established.
4. Monitor the Medicaid third-party liability demonstration programs.
5. Establish clear coverage standards for Medicare and Medicaid that differentiate between the Medicare responsibilities in an episode of care and the Medicaid coverage obligations for additional services.
6. Eliminate regulatory conflicts between rules under the Medicare and Medicaid programs.
7. Improve care continuity and ensuring safe and effective care transitions for dual-eligible individuals.
8. Eliminate cost-shifting between the Medicare and Medicaid program and among related health care providers.

RATIONALE: While home health agencies make the best effort to determine whether a patient is covered under Medicare prior to submission of a claim to Medicaid, incorrect Medicaid payments have occurred. However, the use of an individual appeals system represents a costly, burdensome process for all parties concerned, including the provider of care, the Medicaid program, and Medicare. Strengthened rules and better enforcement would allow CMS to maintain improved oversight over state programs and to minimize the overall cost experienced by all parties. If the model demonstration programs are adopted nationwide, most of the burden of states’ efforts to maximize Medicare will be eliminated.
ENSURE FAIRNESS IN GOVERNMENT FRAUD AND ABUSE ACTIVITIES

ISSUE: Fraudulent and abusive activity by a few home health/hospice providers taint the reputation of the industry as a whole. Current programs available to monitor fraud and abuse in home health/hospice are fragmented and often ineffective. These include CMS’ program integrity and survey and certification activities, and enforcement activities of the Office of Inspector General (OIG).

CMS has supported the concept that all parties involved in the home health benefit work together to protect both the beneficiary and program from fraud and abuse. Although CMS recognizes that fraud and abuse is limited, it “must improve its ability to deter fraud and abuse and to detect it where it does exist.” CMS has pursued the following as a means to control these problems: facilitate suspension of payment, ensure agencies have adequate financial reserves and business plans, require bonding, tighten certification requirements for abusive agencies, and establish joint consumer/provider workgroups, along with continuing adoption of stringent enrollment requirements in an attempt to identify and eliminate fraudulent providers.

The shift to PPS requires a retooling and expansion of anti-fraud efforts from cost reporting and claims concerns to issues of care quality and access. Enforcement authorities are not adequately prepared to make this adjustment. CMS has developed a long-term strategy for detecting and preventing fraud and abuse in response to provisions in the Health Insurance Portability (HIPAA) and Accountability Act. The strategy involves separating program safeguard functions from the claims processing activities carried out by MACs and assigning them to Zone Program Integrity Contractors (ZPIC) and Recovery Audit Contractors (RAC).

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Establish and enforce minimum qualification and training requirements for CMS contractors, including knowledge of Medicare home health and hospice regulations and policies.
2. Closely monitor the work of ZPICs and RACs to ensure appropriate fraud investigation and referrals.
3. Establish a process for stakeholders to address inappropriate review requests with CMS.
4. Ensure timely processing of provider applications, whether for initial enrollment, revalidation, change of information, or change of ownership.
5. Offer timely guidance and assistance to providers when innocent errors lead to incomplete or erroneous applications.
6. Establish a Home Care Program Integrity Council composed of representatives from Medicare, Medicaid, providers, and beneficiaries to develop strategic efforts to avoid and control fraud, waste and abuse.
7. Ensure coordination among the various audit contractors to reduce provider burden and duplication.

Further, the Office of Inspector General should:

1. Establish minimum training requirements for OIG and Department of Justice investigators, as well as working with the industry to address concerns regarding fraud and abuse, particularly under the new incentives of PPS.
2. Streamline their enforcement procedures to minimize the investigative impact on non-fraudulent providers. They should seek assistance from NAHC/HAA in drafting “Fraud Alerts” and investigative procedures.
3. Provide timely responses to providers’ legal questions, as well as access to published legal opinions.
RATIONALE: The direct and ongoing involvement of the home care industry in support of government fraud enforcement activities is necessary. This position is set out in NAHC’s principles regarding provider fraud. At the same time, enforcement efforts must be balanced with adequate safeguards to ensure that innocent providers of care do not fall victim to inappropriate administrative actions.
ENSURE APPLICATION OF PROFESSIONAL AUDITING AND ACCOUNTING STANDARDS

ISSUE: Reports about the poor quality of auditing performed by home health MACs under the Medicare and Medicaid benefits are increasing. Of particular concern is the development of a Medicare “desk audit” to replace the required field audit. Auditing standards are not met when the audit is performed offsite, without the ability of the auditors to discuss issues with home health agency staff and to examine the full range of documents available at the home health agency. While CMS policy allows for a desk review, these reviews are only intended as precursors to full field audits.

The elimination of cost reimbursement raises concerns that MAC auditors will rush to “close the books” on providers. However, the audits remaining under cost reimbursement and any cost report auditing under HHPPS should be consistent with professional standards.

Medicare home health payment rates and the payment model for hospice are planned for rebasing and reform for hospice and will begin in 2014 for home health. To the extent that these reforms rely on cost report data, Medicare is ill-prepared to conduct fair and accurate audits of provider costs.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Ensure that auditing standards comply with “Generally Accepted Accounting Principles” (GAAP) and CMS’ published auditing standards.
2. Bear the burden of proving compliance with standards in the event of a dispute regarding the audit process.
3. Ensure that appropriate field audits are performed and that desk reviews are limited to pre-audit screening actions.
4. Assign adequate auditing resources where payment system reforms are developed.

RATIONALE: Poor quality audits lead to erroneous cost disallowances, premature or unnecessary recoupment, and delays in proper settlement. Shortcuts to auditing such as the “desk audit” create undue risks of error. In this context these are field audits done at the desk, not the traditional FI desk audit per se.
REFORM MEDICARE HOME HEALTH MARKET BASKET INDEX

ISSUE: Medicare law requires that payment rates for home health services be annually updated by a market basket index. Congress has left to Medicare the determination as to the makeup and calculation of the index. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) determines the market basket index by using inflation data from the Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) regarding the rate of inflation in a variety of cost sectors, including health care wages and benefits, transportation, insurance, and space rental. The cost items make up the home health market basket. Each cost category is weighted to reflect the proportionate impact that the respective items have on the overall cost of home health services. The proportionate impact is determined through a review of the cost of these items as set out in the cost reports filed by each home health agency. The annual index is determined by applying the BLS reported rate of inflation in the various cost categories to each category in proportion to its overall cost weight. CMS projects a rate of inflation using a proprietary forecasting system supplied by an outside commercial contractor.

Over the last several years, the Market Basket Index (MBI) has been significantly lower than the index calculated for other provider sectors. Even though these provider sectors share the same labor pool, the index shows a lower projected inflation rate for home health services than the other sectors. In addition, despite dramatically increased costs of transportation, the index reflected a small cost impact.

The current market basket index variables do not include consideration of new costs required by providers such as regulatory changes and employment cost changes. For example, CMS imposed new rules regarding documentation and oversight of therapy services that will increase provider service and administrative costs, yet these costs are not considered in calculating the MBI. Likewise, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) includes new administrative requirements, such as the face-to-face physician encounter, that will raise providers’ operational costs.

The weaknesses in the current MBI calculation method is highlighted this year in the significant difference between the index rate applied to hospitals and the index rate proposed for home health agencies. A difference of .5 is, on its face, unsupportable. Home health agencies have experienced (a) significantly increased administrative costs for the face-to-face encounter rule, (b) a great increase in the requirements for professional therapist assessments of patients, and (c) increases in gas costs for a provider group that travels nearly five billion miles a year.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should thoroughly review and evaluate all aspects of the home health MBI to ensure that it reasonably forecasts annual cost increases. That review and evaluation should include the appropriateness of the BLS proxy data choices, the choice of cost components, the accuracy of the cost component weights, and the reliability of the forecasting model.

The CMS review and evaluation should be made publicly available as part of the issuance of a proposed rule regarding the annual rate update. The index should incorporate a forecast of expected changes in costs resulting from new legislative and regulatory mandates. CMS must include an element in the MBI to address the resulting cost changes when the home health services “product” changes because of new regulatory or administrative requirements.

RATIONALE: The MBI, as constructed by CMS, fails to include consideration of the direct cost increases that CMS rules may have on the delivery of care. Instead, it looks at general cost changes such as the cost of caregivers, transportation, insurance, and office space. This approach does not provide CMS with the information needed to adjust payment rates in relation to regulatory cost increases. Home health agencies compete with hospitals and skilled nursing facilities for nurses, therapists, medical social workers, and aides. Further, home health care is vulnerable to the swings in gasoline pricing and other
transportation costs. Further, changes in law and regulations often increase the costs of care. An accurate inflation update is crucial to secure continued access to home health care. Failure to include these new costs in an MBI results in an unfunded mandate.
ESTABLISH FAIR AND APPROPRIATE STANDARDS FOR REBASING OF MEDICARE HOME HEALTH RATES

ISSUE: Section 3131 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) requires that payment rates for Medicare home health services be rebased beginning in 2014, and that the rebased rates be phased in over a four-year period concluding in 2017. The legislation leaves much to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) to decide on the process and factors considered in the rate rebasing. The law itself provides that the rates “shall be adjusted by a percentage determined appropriate by the Secretary to reflect such factors as changes in the number of visits in an episode, the mix of services in an episode, the average cost of providing care per episode, and other factors that the Secretary considers to be relevant.” The legislation also allows the Secretary to consider differences between hospital-based and freestanding providers, for-profit and not-for-profits, and urban and rural providers.

Data demonstrates that there are wide variations between home health agencies in terms of Medicare financial outcomes. The differences may be due to factors both within and outside the control of the agencies. Further, business needs exist that require that agencies have access to capital to a greater degree than is generally assumed. Additionally, the ability to make a profit in Medicare has triggered efficiencies that have benefited Medicare as well as the provider. Finally, data shows that most of any Medicare margin is redistributed to health care through the offsetting of shortfalls from other payers such as Medicaid and Medicare Advantage plans.

The 2013 and 2014 congressional recommendations from the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) advises Congress to accelerate rebasing with a two rather than four year phase-in. In a public meeting, a commission staff member suggested rates should be based on average costs although previous MedPAC commissioners (and staff) specifically indicated that cost is just one consideration.

Recent data indicates that Medicare margins for home health agencies are quickly declining as the numerous years of rate cuts take their toll. In addition, new regulatory-driven costs are being incurred by home health agencies with more expected in future years.

On November 23, 2013, CMS issued a Final Rule that sets Medicare home health payment rates based on a formula that ostensibly relates to the average cost of care. With this approach, CMS reduces base episode payment rates by the full 14% allowed under PPACA through a 4-year phase in of the rate changes. In addition, CMS limits the increases in per visit payment rates to 3.5% despite a finding that average costs of these visits is as much as 133% of the rates. 78 Fed. Reg. 72256 (December 2, 2013).

The rebased payment rates are founded in old data and based on a formula that ensures that aggregate payments to home health agencies is less than the cost of care. Forecasts of the impact of the new rates show that nearly 73% of all agencies will be paid less than their costs of care by 2017, the final year of the rate phase-in. In addition to the flawed data and rebasing formula, CMS failed to take into account all the costs of home care, the need for business capital by non-profit and proprietary agencies alike, and the wide variation in financial outcomes due to the unique aspects of delivery of care in individuals homes rather than a single site institution.

RECOMMENDATIONS: To ensure continued access to high-quality care, in its rebasing of home health payment rates, CMS should revise its rebasing rule to:
1. Ensure that all existing costs of home health care are known and considered, including telehealth, caregivers such as respiratory therapists and nutritionists, marketing, taxes, acquisition of capital, and new regulatory requirements.

1. Ensure that the rates are rebased in a manner that considers the aggregate financial consequences rather than a siloed approach to segments of the rates.

2. Recognize that a reasonable financial margin is needed for any business, including home health agencies, in order to meet cash flow needs and to incent efficiencies.

3. Convene a technical expert panel of home health agency representatives to provide advice and direction to CMS in determining rate rebasing standards.

4. Recognize differences in types and location of providers in setting rebased rates, but only to the extent that the difference relate to factors outside the control of the providers;

5. Publish the standards for rate rebasing with sufficient time for all stakeholders to fully evaluate and develop comments for consideration.

6. Evaluate the impact of rebased payment rates in a manner that considers short and long-term impact, the impact on the viability of the existing businesses, the impact on access to care, and the impact on clinical practices.

RATIONALE: Congress intentionally required a series of payment reforms in home health services to occur on a gradual and periodic basis to provide the opportunity for companies to adjust so that they might stay in business and allow continued access to care. The rebasing of payment rates is the single most important reimbursement action than can be undertaken by Medicare. A well-informed and rationally developed set of rebasing standards can ensure that Medicare beneficiaries maintain access to high-quality care. Conversely, poorly devised rebasing standards can be a disaster for beneficiaries and the providers that serve them. The CMS rebasing rule will result in a loss of access to care as a result of its failure to consider all reasonable elements of cost, trends in Medicare margins, the wide variation in costs in home health care, and the need for capital.

The rebasing standards must be revised with the recognition that home health care is a health care business that needs to operate within reasonably normal business principles, which include the need to accumulate capital for growth and improvement, and the opportunity to secure a margin to justify the investment – whether from a for-profit enterprise or a non-profit entity that needs a margin to support any mission.
ESTABLISH A FAIR AND EQUITABLE
VALUE BASED PURCHASING (VBP) SYSTEM

ISSUE: Medicare is the largest health care payer in the nation. Growing concerns are being voiced about the poor quality of health care and the country’s lack of an adequate system for compensating providers of care based on the quality of services that they deliver. As a result of the publication of findings about unacceptable quality of care by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), Congress responded to the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) recommendation to develop legislation that would require the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) to identify quality measures and pay providers of Medicare services based on quality of care, rather than quantity of services. Referred to as Pay for Performance (P4P) in the past, rewarding providers for quality of care is now referred to as Value Based Purchasing (VBP).

Under the DRA, Congress charged MedPAC with the responsibility of submitting a report on its recommendations for models for P4P-type home health reimbursement. In January, 2007, MedPAC provided the first indications of the direction that this report may take. MedPAC proposed a P4P payment model utilizing 20 OASIS-based outcome indicators such as toileting, ambulating, and managing oral medications. Under this system, points would be given for improving or stabilizing functional levels – and deducted for each potentially avoidable adverse event, such as an unplanned hospitalization or emergency room visit. A single quality score for each agency would be calculated through this method. MedPAC staff also suggested calculating a confidence interval around each agency’s score. This would be used to pad the score for agencies with small numbers of patients where results would be likely to vary from the mean due to “luck of the draw.” Finally, MedPAC staff made several recommendations for balancing rewards and penalties. MedPAC commissioners raised several objections to the MedPAC staff proposals and suggested consideration of measures other than OASIS outcome measures.

CMS established a home health P4P demonstration project in order to prepare for eventual legislation. The provisions of this demonstration were very different than those proposed by MedPAC, but reflected many of the recommendations made by the home health industry. Through the CMS P4P demonstration contractor, Abt Associates, home health agencies were recruited to participate in January, 2008. The demonstration ended in December, 2009, with awards amounting to over $15 million to agencies for savings to Medicare spending during the two years of the project. Performance was evaluated based on OASIS outcomes for Medicare patients to agencies with (a) the highest scores on outcomes, and (b) the highest levels of improvement. CMS has not yet published the final report on this project.

CMS also contracted with Abt Associates to revise the OASIS data set and add new process measures. CMS hopes that the addition of process measures, which have been reported to home health agencies since September, 2010, will improve its capability to reward providers under VBP.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) of 2010, Section 3006, mandates that the Secretary of HHS develop a plan for a home health value-based purchasing (VBP) program, known in the past as P4P, and submit that plan to Congress. In March, 2012, HHS submitted to Congress its “Plan to Implement a Medicare Home Health Agency Value-Based Purchasing Program.” The Report to Congress describes the current efforts to improve quality and payment efficiency in HHAs. In addition, it considers the following steps required by the statute in designing and implementing an HHA VBP program for payments under the Medicare:

1. Development, selection and modification of process measures of all dimensions of quality and efficiency.
2. Reporting, collection, and validation of quality data.
3. Structure of value-based payment adjustments, including improvement thresholds, size of payments, and sources of funding for VBP payments.
Although the VBP framework includes steps as required by the statute, the plan is a roadmap for a VBP program and does not include specific elements of a VBP plan.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. Ensure consultation with provider representatives in identification of appropriate VBP outcome and process measures, and in the development of a fair and equitable system.
2. Require CMS to thoroughly test the validity and reliability of OASIS-C using current guidelines in the real world of home health application.
3. Require that OASIS-C quality refinements and new process measures be proven accurate predictors of quality before these measures are used to pay home health agencies for performance.
4. Establish a system that is adequately risk-adjusted and does not negatively impact Medicare beneficiaries.
5. If health care information technology (HIT) is part of a VBP system, add funding sources for home health agencies.
6. Create a separate pool that would be used to fund VBP, rather than funding by withholding a percentage of payment from home health agencies.
7. Fund VBP incentive from savings realized by the Medicare program as a result of quality care.
8. Base the system on measures that are under the control of, or reasonably susceptible to the influence of, the home health agency while the patient is on service with the agency.
9. Base selected measures on uniform data that home health agencies have collected and reported for a sufficient period of time in order to ensure consistency and reliability.
10. Compensate providers that demonstrate improvement as well as top performers.
11. Facilitate relief from current data collection requirements and administrative burdens and costs.
12. Take into account geographic variations and agencies with anomalous patient populations, such as large numbers of dually eligible patients, chronically ill long stay, or small number of patients served.
13. Apply VBP to the Medicare patient data only.
14. Ensure that the risk adjustment methodology effectively adjusts for age, the number of co-morbidities, and Medicaid eligibility.
15. Consider patient length of stay when measuring the “incidence of acute care hospitalization.”
16. Withhold support of the initial MedPAC staff P4P proposal.
17. Base the system on measures that are meaningful to patients, providers, payers, and other stakeholders and represent value and important aspects of care and services.
18. Refrain from implementing VBP in home health until completion of demonstration projects, analysis of the results, and pilot testing of any proposed plan.
19. Spread reward payments throughout the calendar year.

**RATIONALE:** Identification of acceptable, fair and equitable measures can be problematic, especially in light of the many variations in the needs and social and economic status of Medicare beneficiaries. Therefore, development of a VBP system must be undertaken carefully, in concert with the provider community, and only after sufficient research has been conducted in order to ensure that providers are rewarded appropriately and not unfairly penalized. Small providers do not have the reserve funds to invest in costly HIT. Furthermore, it would be unfair to providers to withhold monies needed for daily operation until in the end of the year in order to fund VBP.

VBP will only serve as an incentive to providers to improve the quality of care if the agencies that improve, as well as top performers, are rewarded. The model P4P system displayed by MedPAC staff fails on a number of fronts to meet the VBP principles that NAHC and other organizations in the home care community have established. The CMS P4P demonstration appears to be more in line with NAHC’s
principles for a workable and appropriate VBP reimbursement model in home health than does the MedPAC staff.

It is generally accepted in government circles that, because of the outcome measures already available to home health providers, home health is a step closer than most other providers in preparing for VBP. However, many questions exist about the validity and reliability of OASIS in light of new changes and additions. The testing of these new process measures has yet to be done since they were implemented beginning January 1, 2010.

In consideration of the P4P demonstration project, as well as any system adopted for implementation, variations of health status and practice patterns found in various parts of the country necessitate that performance thresholds be compared separately. Therefore, geographic areas that are smaller than entire states should be identified for comparison of agency performance. Core-based statistical areas (CBSAs) may serve as more appropriate for determining performance thresholds.
ESTABLISH REASONABLE POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCEDURES FOR THE PHYSICIAN FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTER REQUIRED FOR MEDICARE AND MEDICAID HOME HEALTH CERTIFICATION

ISSUE: The Patient Protection and Affordable Care of 2010 (ACA) conditions Medicare payment for home health services on a physician or certain non-physician practitioner having a face-to-face encounter with the patient prior to certifying the need for care. The statute also called for application of this requirement to Medicaid home health services. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) promulgated a Final Rule on November 2, 2010, for Medicare that requires the encounter to occur no more than 90 days before or 30 days after the start of care. The rule includes significant, prescribed documentation requirements the physician must comply with, or the home health agency may not bill for the services. The effective date for implementation was to be January 1, 2011. CMS delayed enforcement of the rule until April 1, 2011, to provide agencies and other stakeholders with additional time to establish operational protocols necessary to comply with the regulation. A Medicaid face-to-face proposed rule was published during 2011 with similar requirements. Although some states have already implemented Medicaid face-to-face requirements, no federal final rule has yet been published.

As part of the certification form itself, or as an addendum to it, the physician must document that the physician or NPP saw the patient, and document how the patient’s clinical condition supports a homebound status and need for skilled services. The form may not contain standardized language or check boxes, unless the documentation is done electronically. Although the physician or the physician’s office staff may complete the form from the medical, documentation must include the date of the encounter, supporting evidence of homebound status, and evidence that home health services are medically necessary. CMS clarified that is not permissible for the physician to dictate the face to face encounter findings to the home health agency staff to transcribe and send for signature. The stringent documentation guidelines are proving to be burdensome to physicians. Many physicians have expressed frustration with the additional documentation requirement, and are resisting complying with the regulation. In response to physician complaints CMS advised them that documentation requirements are far less detailed than home health agencies are asking for, despite the fact that this information is contrary to Federal Register notices, policy manuals guidance and CMS issued Q&As.

CMS provided some flexibility regarding institutional physicians when patients are hospitalized or in skilled nursing facilities. Medicare will allow a physician who attended to the patient but does not follow patient in the community, such as a hospitalist, to certify the need for home health care based on their face to face contact with the patient. However, the documentation requirements and restrictions are the same, and many institutional physicians are not willing to certify patients for Medicare home health services. In addition, CMS took steps to reduce the burden on inpatient physicians by publishing revisions to the face-to-face regulation and policy in the 2012 PPs rate update notice, allowing community physicians to certify a patient for home health based on inpatient physicians’ encounter documentation. CMS allowed for greater flexibility, in the 2013 PPS rate update, by permitting the allowed NPP to conduct the face-to-face encounter in an inpatient facility and communicate the findings to the inpatient physician who would the communicate to the findings to the community physician. However, this has resulted in even more confusion and many questions as to how these provisions are to be put into practice.

In addition, home health agencies have been subject to high denial rates for insufficient F2F encounter documentation. One of the contractor has reported a denial rate as high 80%. The high denial rates suggest a general misunderstanding by agencies and physicians as to what CMS expects physician’s to include on the F2F encounter document.
Furthermore, home health agencies have been informed that they may not bill a patient for uncompensated care due to noncompliance with the new requirement. Therefore, agencies will be held financial responsible for any care provided to a patient where the face to face encounter has not occurred during the prescribed time frames or the physician’s documentation does not satisfy CMS’ requirements. Agencies will have to choose whether or not to admit patients that are referred but have not had the required face to face encounter, or to discharge patients on services that have not had a face to face encounter with the physician within 30 days of admission. Forcing agencies to choose between providing uncompensated care or not accept a patient onto service will likely result in a lack of access to home health services for certain Medicare beneficiaries. Beneficiaries without transportation, a primary care physician at the time services are required, or resources to facilitate a visit to the physician are placed at a disadvantage for receiving home care services for which they are entitled.

Finally, CMS imposed restrictions on the use of telehealth technologies for the conduct of face-to-face encounters that make it almost impossible for its application.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Provide flexibility in the documentation requirements to:
   a. Limit the documentation to permit the physician to sign an attestation statement that the face to face encounter had occurred.
   b. Permit a uniform certification and face-to-face encounter form and language.
   c. Permit the physician to dictate the face-to-face encounter information to the home health staff.
   d. Allow any physician to conduct a face-to-face encounter and certify eligibility for home health services, regardless of whether that physician or another physician is responsible for the plan of care.
2. Apply “without fault” provisions, or permit the agency to bill the patient, when non-compliance is the fault of the physician or beneficiary.
3. Establish exemptions to face-to-face encounter requirements including but not limited to: patients receiving home health services after an inpatient stay; those patients living in medically underserved areas; and any persons with barriers to access to care, such as individuals incapable of leaving home and without access to a home visiting physician.
4. Remove the reference to section 1834(m) of the Social Security Act and substitute a definition of telehealth services that allows an individual to meet the face-to-face encounter requirements through modern technologies available in their home. These technologies should include two-way audio and video communications.
5. Include the changes referenced above as regulatory measures to the extent that CMS is unable under the existing Section 6407 to implement the changes.
6. Establish a process to re-evaluate CMS policies for the face-to-face requirement that includes input from providers, physicians and beneficiaries.
7. Modify Medicare coverage rules to cover an ambulance transport to a physician’s office for beneficiaries that require an ambulance.
8. Require States to include all of the recommendations above to Medicaid face-to-face requirements.

RATIONALE: A face-to-face encounter is an event outside of the home health agency’s control. An agency can facilitate a visit to the physician, but whether or not the encounter takes place is within the control of the physician and/or patient. We believe that CMS has gone beyond statutory intent in the regulation on two fronts: requiring that the encounter be directly for the primary reason for the prescribed home health services, and conditioning home health payment on unprecedented physician documentation on the encounter including a rationalization of the certification as to how the patient meets Medicare coverage requirements.
Home health agencies are subject to nonpayment of their claim if physicians fail to meet the unprecedented documentation requirements. In other words, the non-compliance of a party outside the control of the agency will cause financial harm to the agency and be of no consequence to the physician. Home health agencies have no authority over the physician to guarantee that the documentation is properly composed in the first place.

In the absence of a uniform certification statement, the physician certification is confusing and overly burdensome to physicians. The majority of physicians will fail to provide a statement that meets CMS’ requirements, which implies the need for an intricately thought out statement that connects encounter reasons to homebound status to Medicare coverage of medically necessary services. Medicare’s own contractors have difficulty themselves with such a task as it is carried out in the appeals process. The current plan of care includes detailed information to support homebound status and the medical necessity of care by requiring medical diagnoses, functional status, medications, and detailed orders for care.

Home health agencies must be held harmless for any non-compliant documentation by the physician or failure of the patient to comply that is outside of their control. CMS should automatically apply the “without fault” provisions in section 1870 of the Social Security Act where the HHA receives a properly completed certification statement from the physician but that the physician is non-compliant with requirements for documentation or the patient fails to see the physician. Also, the good faith efforts of the HHA should be protected against physician or beneficiary non-compliance through payment guarantees under section 1879 of the Social Security Act.

Failure to apply the same considerations to Medicaid face-to-face requirements will severely impact access to care for Medicaid enrollees. Furthermore, it will create further administrative burdens and financial problems for Medicare service providers who are already seriously underpaid.
ESTABLISH APPROPRIATE POLICIES & PROCEDURES RELATED TO PROVIDER ENROLLMENT, CHAIN, AND OWNERSHIP SYSTEM (PECOS) EDIT

ISSUE: Section 6405 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) conditions Medicare payment for home health services on the physician certifying and recertifying that the patient for home health services is enrolled in Medicare. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) promulgated an Interim Final Rule on May 5, 2010, requiring that the ordering physician listed on the home health claim have an approved enrollment record or a valid opt-out record in the Provider Enrollment, Chain, and Ownership System (PECOS) as validation of Medicare enrollment. The ACA required and the regulation established a July 1, 2010, effective date for the rule.

PECOS is an Internet-based application that allows physicians, non-physician practitioners, providers, and supplier organizations to enroll, make a change in their Medicare enrollment, view their Medicare enrollment information on file with Medicare, or check on the status of a Medicare enrollment application. Through PECOS, CMS is able to manage, track, and validate enrollment data collected in both paper form and electronically via the Internet.

CMS has made great strides over the past two years to revalidate all Medicare providers and practitioners in order to update the PECOS database. However, there are still problems with inaccurate information, and the reasons for the inaccuracies are unknown. In addition, the only resource providers have to confirm whether a physician has a record in PECOS is through a report that CMS posts on its website, which lists the names of enrolled physician and practitioners. Unfortunately, the list is updated only twice a week and reflects an inaccurate PECOS database.

After a long delay in claims editing for PECOS-enrolled physicians, CMS activated the edits on January 6, 2014. Although CMS maintains that the Program is ready to implement the PECOS edits there is great concern that claims will be erroneously denied due the of integrity of the PECOS system and the potential for inaccuracies in the CMS report. As of late December 2013, agencies were identifying Medicare enrolled physicians that were not appearing on the CMS report or who had inexplicably been removed from the report. In addition, we are aware physicians, such as those with the Veterans Administration, who are refusing to enroll in Medicare even though they continue to order home health services for Medicare beneficiaries.

Furthermore, claims that do not pass the PECOS edit will be denied rather than rejected. Therefore, even if the claim is denied in error, the agency must go through the appeals process.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Delay the implementation of requiring the ordering physician have an approved record in PECOS until such time that CMS can assure the system fully operational and maintains accurate information.
2. Provide an ongoing educational campaign to inform physicians of the requirement to enroll in PECOS in accordance with the statutory requirement.
3. Allow home health agencies access to MAC Standard System records to research the enrollment status of physicians updated on a daily basis.
4. Establish polices and procedures for routine re-openings of claims that have been denied in error.
5. CMS should reconsider its decision to deny claims that fail the PECOS edits to a policy where claims will be rejected.
RATIONALE: We recognize the need for CMS to establish the process for approving physicians enrolled in Medicare, and creating an official roster for listing all physicians approved by Medicare. However, numerous problems, including poor communication with and misinformation to physicians, delayed enrollment processes, problems with the PECOS system, and infrequent updates make it impossible to establish a firm implementation date at this time. It is our belief that Congress did not intend to disrupt medically necessary services to Medicare beneficiaries and would agree that CMS must ensure they are capable of maintaining the system that conditions payments to Medicare providers. In addition, physician cooperation is paramount in order to implement the PECOS enrollment requirement. CMS must ensure they have an effective education campaign, with ongoing outreach to physicians and eligible practitioners.
II. QUALITY
ENSURE TRAINING IS CONDUCTED AND CONSISTENT FOR HOME HEALTH AND HOSPICE SURVEYORS

ISSUE: State surveyors for Medicare certified providers often survey all types of providers, e.g., nursing homes, home health agencies, hospices, and hospitals. Each of these providers is governed by a different set of complex regulations. CMS requires that all new surveyors attend CMS-sponsored basic HHA and hospice training programs. In the past, state surveyors were trained by other state surveyors who may or may not have attended CMS surveyor training. Fraud and abuse initiatives have placed surveyors in the position of reviewing records for coverage compliance and determining what documentation should be submitted to Medicare Administrative Contractors (MACs), for which they have received little training. When surveyors inappropriately cite deficiencies as a result of misunderstood regulations, the burden is on the provider to prove the citation wrong. Although CMS-required projection of costs for training, including on-site, webcasts, and satellite broadcasts, there is no mechanism for enforcement or penalties for failure to participate. Surveyors have been restrained to computerized documentation of care, requiring home health agencies to print hard copies of records required for review.

CMS has taken steps over the past several years to improve on surveyor training and provide in-depth and consistent training to state surveyors by CMS Central S&C staff. However, not every state participates in CMS training.

New surveyor guidelines and protocols were instituted by CMS in May, 2011, in response to the General Accounting Office (GAO) report of inconsistencies in surveys from state to state. These new protocols focus standard surveys on those CoPs that impact quality of patient care. It has been reported that there has been an increase in both standard and condition-level deficiencies as a result of this new guidance. In addition, a new alternative sanction regulation was implemented in 2013, with civil monetary penalties to begin in 2014 for HHAs with condition-level deficiencies. The alternate sanction requirements have potential for significant penalties that could be imposed.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should follow through on its stated plan to provide surveyor training on the Medicare Home Health and Hospice regulations. Training programs should:

1. Be required for all new surveyors, with refresher training every 3 years.
2. Be based on an established curriculum with specific learning objectives.
3. Emphasize survey citations are based on evidence of trends of a violation rather than a single violation.
4. Include information on Medicare coverage of services, adequate to identify possible problems to be referred to the MAC.
5. Ensure consistent interpretation and application of the regulations.
6. To reach all surveyors instead of only a small group, utilize technology such as webcasts, interactive training, etc.
7. Be available to providers.
8. Be based on interpretive guidelines as created and updated by CMS to reflect current regulations.
9. Include education in utilizing clinical information systems and performing online record review.
10. Evaluate the accuracy and effectiveness of surveyor guidance issued in May, 2011, and ensure that all surveyors are adequately trained in the new protocols.

State agencies should be:

1. Required to show evidence of surveyor training for all new surveyors and provide ongoing continuing education to all surveyors.
2. Evaluated and penalized if they fail to have surveyors attend training programs.
3. Required to have a healthcare background.
4. Required to compensate surveyors commensurate with area standards.
CMS should promote communication between survey agencies and MACs:

1. A formal procedure for sharing information between the Medicare Administrative Contractors (MACs) and state survey agencies (SAs) should be developed.
2. SAs should report suspected coverage problems to the MACs, and the MACs should report suspected quality problems to the SAs.
3. MACs should be cross-trained on basic coverage and regulatory principles, reporting procedures, and the bounds of their individual authority.
4. Training should be ongoing to maintain current knowledge.

RATIONALE: Surveyors for the Medicare Home Health and Hospice benefits need full knowledge of the provisions and requirements of the benefits to avoid inappropriately citing hospice and home health providers with deficiencies and to ensure the highest quality of care. A healthcare background is essential for proper assessment of quality care. Underpaying surveyors limits a state’s ability to recruit quality personnel. In addition, providing current interpretive guidelines to providers will foster understanding and compliance with regulatory requirements. It is by knowing what is required that providers can maintain compliance with requirements. Surveyors are not adequately trained to make coverage decisions, especially in light of the fact that some agencies may have a different MAC, with different coverage policy interpretations, than the one normally assigned to providers in that state. Surveyors must become adept at accessing and reviewing clinical records online as more home health agencies move to e-health records.

Also, in light of new state surveyor guidance implemented in May, 2011, and alternative sanctions that will be imposed in 2013 and 2014, it is critical that experienced as well as new surveyors receive in-depth training on the new guidelines and survey protocols.
INCREASE FLEXIBILITY IN THE APPLICATION OF THE CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

ISSUE: CMS requires the application of all of the Medicare Conditions of Participation (CoP) to all patients served by the Medicare-certified agency, regardless of payer source or services. These requirements increase the cost of services to all payers. Yet, one CoP (supervision of home health aides) has been written to provide flexibility in application based on service needs. Another, OASIS, varies depending on payer, but CMS plans to apply OASIS requirements to all patients in the future. The Secretary’s Advisory Committee on Regulatory Reform adopted a recommendation to apply certain Medicare Home Health CoP to Medicare patients only.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Allow HHAs flexibility in application of the CoP to payers other than Medicare.
2. Limit application of the following requirements to medically unstable patients and patients receiving medical interventions for treatment of diseases only:
   a. Plan of care (42 CFR §§484.18(a) and 484.18)
   b. Advance directive (42 CFR §484.10(c)(2)(ii))
   c. Comprehensive assessment (42 CFR §484.55) at specific time points
3. Apply OASIS requirements to Medicare fee-for-service patients only.

RATIONALE: Some CoPs, in their full application, are excessive for the delivery of some services by home health agencies. With the introduction of PPS and OASIS, burdensome regulations that have been instituted since the BBA of 1997, it has become increasingly difficult for agencies to comply with the CoP for all patients and control costs. Building additional flexibility into the CoP would help contain costs of delivery of services to non-Medicare patients by certified agencies. As a result, non-Medicare patients would be more likely to continue to receive care from certified, regulated agencies rather than unregulated separate entities, and thus maintain quality.

Advance directives are not indicated for medically stable persons and persons not receiving medical intervention for treatment of diseases, such as maternity and newborn patients. It is not necessary for physicians to review and sign the plan of care for medically stable persons receiving health promotion and personal care services, according to state nurse practice acts. Physician order requirements were designed for legal authority to provide care and control of utilization. Nursing and therapy practice acts now recognize all but invasive procedures as independent aspects of practice, so orders are not usually required for legal coverage. Physicians’ orders, with the intent of controlling utilization, are a payer issue rather than an operations or practice issue. If a payer wants to require this and assume the costs thereof, it should be a condition of payment. OASIS data collection and reporting is not covered by most payers. Medicaid payments do not cover the cost of care in most states before the added burden of OASIS. Managed care plans do not use the quality reports produced from OASIS data.
**INCREASE FLEXIBILITY IN AIDE SUPERVISION REQUIREMENTS**

**ISSUE:** The current Conditions of Participation (CoP) for home health and hospice require one aide supervision visit to every home health/hospice patient receiving skilled services every two weeks by an RN, with or without the aide present (42 CFR §484.36(d)). Therapists are permitted to perform aide supervision in therapy-only cases. For home health patients not receiving skilled services, the aide supervisory visit must occur at least every 60 days with the aide present. The purpose of the supervisory visit is to assess relationships with the patient and the need for services. The CoPs also require HHAs to complete a performance review for each home health aide at least every 12 months (§484.36(b)(2)). These requirements do not promote the most efficient or effective aide supervision. CMS requested recommendations for changes to supervisory requirements when the proposed CoPs were published in 1997. If CMS changes the aide supervision regulations, there is a concern that states will not update their requirements to match changes promulgated by CMS.

In addition, CMS has expanded the bathing competency requirements for hospice aides in the revised hospice CoPs to include competence in sponge, shower, and tub bathing. CMS has expressed its intent to require the same for home care aides (HCAs). Under the current CoPs for home care agencies, aides are only required to demonstrate competency in performing a sponge, shower, or tub bath. Requiring aides to demonstrate competency in all bathing methods is burdensome, and depending on the patient assignment, may not be appropriate. Furthermore, HHAs have been functioning under this CoP since 1994 without compromising patient safety or quality of care.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. Eliminate the current supervisory requirements.
2. Focus aide supervisory requirements on the aide, not the patient.
3. Allow HHAs to establish their own policies for frequency of aide supervision based on the aide's skills, experience, and past performance.
4. At a minimum, require supervision of every aide every 60 days in at least one home while the aide is performing patient care.
5. Allow LPNs/LVNs to supervise home health aides.
6. Allow therapist to perform aide supervision as appropriate, regardless of whether nursing services are being provided.
7. Urge states to adopt rules for aide supervision that mirror federal requirements.
8. Only require competency in tub bathing if the aide assignment requires the skill.

**RATIONALE:** Assessing patient needs, developing a plan of care, and care coordination (including aide services) are already the home care professional’s responsibility. The current regulation does not ensure that every aide is observed performing the job functions on a regular basis. Skills and knowledge of home health aides vary widely depending on training and experience. Therefore, frequency of supervisory visits should reflect these variations. Supervisory visits to observe the aide’s performance of skills and interaction with patients provide opportunities for ongoing performance review, corrective action, and teaching. Additionally, consistent federal and state requirements will eliminate conflicting and burdensome rules. Supervision of every aide every two weeks creates an unnecessary strain on limited nursing resources. Since therapists are deemed capable of supervising home health aides in therapy-only cases, they should not be prohibited from doing so in nurse/therapy cases. Furthermore, licensed practical/vocational nurses have sufficient training in personal care to effectively evaluate and supervise aide services.
IMPROVE AIDE QUALIFICATIONS TO PROTECT CONSUMERS

ISSUE: Regulations require training and/or competency evaluation for home health aides working in home health agencies and hospices (42 CFR §484.36). Therefore, some aides may not receive training. This may be appropriate for workers with experience, but could be insufficient for new workers. Home health aide training and testing is provided primarily by the hospice or home health agency.

In the proposed CoP, CMS suggested that nurse aides in good standing with state registries for nursing homes be considered qualified home health aides. Nursing home regulations include training requirements, approved training programs, and a registry for nurse aides. CMS has suggested that there should be more consistency between home health/hospice and nursing home regulations for aides.

CMS has included a criminal background check requirement for home health aides in the revised hospice CoPs. However, currently there is no national system for conducting background checks, and many local systems are too narrow in scope and lack timely responses.

There are home care workers who function at a less complex level than the home health aide (e.g., homemakers, personal care aides). However, because of the CMS policy to apply the CoP to all clients and services the agency offers, all home health aides must meet the qualifications cited in 42 CFR §484.36. The only exceptions are state Medicaid personal care aides.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. CMS’ core requirements should be consistent for home health aides working in all settings. Aide training and certification programs should address core content applicable to all aides, as well as site-of-practice specific requirements and certification. These requirements should apply to Medicare as well as all Medicaid programs (e.g., PCA, waiver programs).
2. CMS should include in the HHA-approved training program the Home Care Aide Code of Ethics (developed by the Home Care Aide Association of America), which focuses on the basic principles of quality care and contains guidelines for clients’ rights and home health aides’ rights.
3. There should be three levels of certification, with specific training and testing requirements for each level as proposed by the Home Care Aide Association of America’s position paper entitled “National Uniformity for Paraprofessional Title, Qualifications, and Supervision.” The nurse aide and home health aide should be required to meet the level III requirements described in this paper.
4. If training is required, certified aides presently working in home care should be grandfathered.
5. Training programs should be approved by the state or by an approved accrediting organization.
6. Additional orientation hours should be provided to aides to assist the aide to adjust to home care.
7. Educational institutions and community organizations, as well as providers, should be approved by these accrediting organizations to offer training and competency evaluation programs.
8. A national registry for aides practicing in all settings (home care, nursing homes and hospitals) should be established to maintain an up-to-date list of aides who are in good standing.
9. A system for criminal checks should be developed that is organized, reasonable in cost and will provide up to date information in a timely manner. (See “Make Personnel Qualifications Consistent and Require Criminal Background Checks.”)

RATIONALE: The basic job functions for home health aides and aides in other settings are the same, with differences only in application to a particular setting. A consistent training and certification program would prevent unnecessary duplication and allow easier mobility of home health/hospice workers. Aides would only have to complete the site-specific requirements when changing settings. Home health agencies/hospices would be able to accept with confidence a previous certification from an approved program.
There are different levels of home health/hospice workers with some only performing homemaker functions, so different levels of training and competency evaluation are indicated. Consistency in training programs will also better prepare hospice aides to provide personal care services to nursing home residents enrolled in a hospice program.

Home health aides and nursing home aides should be tracked through the same registry, since workers may move in and out of these settings. Although criminal checks are indicated, there is no systematic and effective way to accomplish them in a timely manner.
ENSURE FAIR APPLICATION OF IMMEDIATE JEOPARDY CITATIONS AND APPEAL RIGHTS

ISSUE: CMS issued a policy in August, 2000, to Federal and State Survey and Certification personnel and Complaint Investigators that can result in the termination of Medicare and Medicaid providers who fail to immediately correct and implement measures to prevent repeat jeopardy situations. This policy was published as Appendix Q of the interpretive guidelines for survey of skilled nursing facilities but is applied to all provider types. Immediate jeopardy is defined as “a situation in which the provider's noncompliance with one or more requirements of participation has caused, or is likely to cause, serious injury, harm, impairment, or death to a resident.”

A provider may be cited and placed on the fast track for termination as a Medicare or Medicaid provider if a single individual is at risk. Serious harm, injury, impairment or death does not have to occur, but merely have a high potential of occurrence. Some surveyors have used this policy to place home health agencies on the fast track to termination. In some of the cases, agencies were cited because they provided needed care in compliance with the requirements to patients who failed to comply with recommended health practices, or chose to remain in less than ideal social situations. Surveyors have gone so far as to suggest infringement of patients’ rights by recommending that unsafe objects be removed from homes by providers. In addition, there is the potential that surveyors may interpret OASIS adverse event reports, which are intended to be potential indicators of problems, as a basis for immediate jeopardy.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Provide training to surveyors to help them identify real jeopardy and to differentiate it from standards of living that are different than their own. Surveyors should be provided with tools to help them identify jeopardy that results from the home health agency's failure to provide safe and effective care.
2. Surveyors should be trained to recognize patient right of choice and that home health agencies lack 24-hour control over patients’ actions.
3. Agencies should not be cited when jeopardy results because patients choose to remain in less than ideal situations or engage in unhealthful practices. Citations should be clearly stated to ensure that agencies are able to identify the jeopardy and take steps necessary to remove it prior to the surveyor exit.
4. In cases where home health agencies disagree with an immediate jeopardy citation, the HHA should have the right to appeal the citation prior to termination through a dispute resolution process.
5. Any decision by a surveyor to terminate an agency based on immediate jeopardy should subject to expedited review by the CMS region office.
6. Surveyors should be trained to differentiate between OASIS adverse event reports as indictors of potential quality problems and true “immediate jeopardy” situations.
7. Work with the provider community to identify remedial factors and corrective actions should be undertaken.

RATIONALE: Surveyors are required to conduct surveys across multiple provider types. Untrained, inexperienced home health surveyors lack the skills necessary to differentiate between jeopardy resulting from poor quality care and that created by patients’ personal life habits and chosen environment. Adequate training in the application of the survey process to the home setting is necessary to avoid citations and termination proceedings based on risky situations that result from patients’ choices.

Beneficiaries often choose to remain in unsafe, non-therapeutic situations, and protective service agencies frequently fail to intervene in response to home health referrals.
If surveyors are not provided with sufficient training in the use of Adverse Events reports, any adverse event could inappropriately be identified as a potential situation for patient harm. A surveyor could almost do a “virtual” survey through the adverse events reports and claim immediate jeopardy.
DEVELOP APPROPRIATE POLICIES FOR EQUITABLE AND CONSISTENT IMPLEMENTATION OF SURVEY AND CERTIFICATION PENALTIES AND SANCTIONS

ISSUE: CMS published a final rule for administrative and civil money sanctions against agencies that are not in compliance with the Conditions of Participation in the November 8, 2012, Federal Register for the 2013 HHPPS rate update final rule. CMS developed a range of sanctions, specific procedures and conditions for imposing sanctions, and the severity of each sanction. These “alternate sanctions” could be imposed in addition to or in lieu of termination from the Medicare program.

The type of sanctions CMS has made available include: civil money penalties, suspension of payment for new admissions, temporary management, a directed plan of correction, and directed in-service training. The criteria used in selecting which sanction(s) are to be applied and the severity of the sanctions is vague. And a combination of sanctions can be applied at one time. For example, CMP can be imposed per diem or per instant or a combination of both, along with other sanctions. In addition, the amounts of CMP can be as high as $10,000 per day for deficiencies that pose immediate jeopardy, and as high as $8,500 per day for deficiencies that do not pose immediate jeopardy. Further, sanctions are imposed until it has been determined that the agency has achieved substantial compliance. Surveyors must complete an on-site follow-up visit in order to make a compliance determination whenever an agency has been cited with a condition-level deficiency. Due to state survey workloads, there are instances where surveyors have not returned to the HHA for a resurvey for over 90 days.

Additionally, there has been persistent inconsistency in the interpretation of the CoPs among Medicare state surveyors. The level and severity of deficiencies can vary greatly from surveyor to surveyor. The rule is unclear on the degree of influence any surveyor will have in determining which sanctions apply; however, CMS traditionally has provided the State surveyors with a great deal of discretion in survey matters.

In the final rule, CMS provides for an IDR process when a condition level deficiency has been cited. However, this process will not be effective until July, 2014, and has never been used in home health. Therefore, its effectiveness in promoting a due process for HHAs is yet to be determined.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Only condition-level deficiencies that impact quality of care should warrant sanctions.
2. Condition-level deficiencies should be differentiated from standard-level deficiencies and those that pose a threat to patients.
3. Complaint surveys should be based on “significant” complaints that affect patient health, safety, and rights (42 CFR §§484.10, 484.18, 484.30, 484.32, 484.34, and 484.36).
4. Personnel responsible for imposing sanctions should be trained and tested on the CoP.
5. An objective, structured system for imposing civil money penalties should be developed.
6. All surveys should conclude with an exit interview to permit the provider to clarify issues.
7. All recommendations for sanctions should be subject to region office review prior to imposition.
8. Sanctions should not be imposed for deficiencies that have been self-corrected by the provider prior to determination of noncompliance.
9. HHA stakeholders must be permitted to review and work with CMS prior to development of interpretive guidelines for imposing alternate sanctions.

RATIONALE: It is important that the sanctions and appeals process assure equitable application of the statute provisions and they protect agencies from unwarranted penalties. The type of sanctions, levels of civil money penalties, and the correlation between the sanctions and specific deficiencies is critical in
assuring that the provisions are implemented appropriately and equitably. Therefore, any alternate sanction should be subject to objective standards for application and review. Furthermore, specific guidelines for surveyors are essential to ensure equitable imposition of sanctions.
IDENTIFY INDEPENDENT SPECIALISTS TO RESOLVE SURVEY DISCREPANCIES THROUGH THE INFORMAL DISPUTE RESOLUTION (IDR) PROCESS

ISSUE: In the 2013 final rule for the HHPPS update, CMS issued regulations for alternative sanctions that may be applied in lieu of or in addition to termination from the Medicare program when a HHA has a condition-level deficiency. In the final rule, CMS also provides agencies with an opportunity for an IDR. Agencies may submit a request for an IDR for a condition-level deficiency to the state survey agency. However, the IDR process is conducted internally by the same state survey agency that initially cited the HHA, and although the state survey agency may use independent contractors for their IDR process, there is no requirement for an independent review.

The variance in the surveyors’ interpretations of the Conditions of Participation for Home Health Agencies and the subjective nature of the Medicare survey have created survey problems in many parts of the country. The resulting controversies had not been adequately addressed in prior guidelines and regulations. The new IDR process is a welcome step in the right direction, but must be implemented to objectively address discrepancies in interpretations of when a condition-level deficiency has occurred.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Retain final responsibility for interpretation and application of federal regulations rather than abdicate authority to states.
2. Work with industry representatives to develop an effective communications process among CMS, surveyors and the industry.
3. Identify one or more persons to be available to answer questions and resolve conflicts between surveyors and providers prior to issuance of statements of deficiency.

RATIONALE: While it is important that agencies’ services meet appropriate standards of care, the CoPs by their nature are general in nature and subject to various interpretations. In addition, surveyors and providers are often not privy to past interpretations and clarifications that affect agency operations. Most disagreements could be readily resolved by a person with extensive knowledge of the regulations and requirements, and those that escalate to a higher level would be few in number – but important in nature.

By establishing an IDR process that requires independent specialists in resolving CoP deficiency disputes, the state survey agency and the HHA can be assured of accurate compliance interpretations and appropriate methods for corrections.
REQUIRE REGION OFFICE REVIEW OF CHALLENGES TO STANDARD-LEVEL DEFICIENCIES

ISSUE: Home health agencies and hospices are subject to Conditions of Participation (CoP) and regular surveys to participate in the Medicare program. Due to the complexity of Medicare regulations, interpretive guidelines, and limited surveyor training, inconsistent and highly subjective interpretations of these requirements continue and are likely to exacerbate as new proposed CoPs are eventually implemented. Also, CMS has not published adequate criteria for differentiating condition-level from standard-level deficiencies, and immediate jeopardy from conditions/standards results in arbitrary classifications by state survey agencies. The final rule for the 2013 HHPPS rate update includes provisions for an IDR process for condition-level deficiencies; however, agencies do not have any appeals process for standard-level deficiencies. State surveyors often cite agencies with deficiencies based on a single incident, rather than based on trends. State agencies have been known to use outdated policies or inappropriate interpretations.

Some surveyors continue to provide exit conferences that are less than helpful to providers. The deficiencies appearing on the written statement are not always consistent with the information provided during the exit conference, thus denying agencies the opportunity to present rebuttal documentation during the exit. Some survey agencies require providers to attend an exit conference in the survey agency’s offices, making it impossible for the provider to point out contradictory information available in patient records.

The current CMS instructions require that home health/hospice providers respond to statements of deficiencies within 10 days. The State Operations Manual includes contradictory language, in one site indicating that providers have the option to submit their objections to deficiencies with no plan of correction, but at another site suggesting that a plan of correction is required in all instances. Providers are instructed to indicate their disagreement with a citation on the right site of the statement of deficiency form. Since statements of deficiencies are paper, rather than electronic, providers must hand print or type responses using a typewriter, which is labor intensive.

If agencies submit both a corrective action and their disagreement, the disagreement is often ignored since the corrective action is included. If they submit only their disagreement, the plan of correction is considered unacceptable and the agency is at risk of termination. This essentially nullifies providers’ ability to refute a deficiency citation. Ordinarily, the provider is expected to achieve compliance within 60 days of notice of the deficiency unless the seriousness warrants quicker corrective action.

Region Offices (ROs) differ in their willingness to work with providers in resolving disputes regarding interpretations of requirements. Some will offer to take issues to CMS Central; others are offended by requests for such additional reviews.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Surveyors should be required to advise agencies of deficiencies during the exit conference.
2. CMS should require that all challenges to a deficiency citation be reviewed by the RO and a response given to the HHA/hospice within 30 days.
3. Challenges to a deficiency should stop the clock until the RO responds.
4. For standard-level deficiencies and condition-level deficiencies that pose no immediate threat to patients, the HHA/hospice should not be required to submit the corrective action initially. If the RO upholds the deficiency, the HHA/hospice would then be required to submit the corrective action plan.
5. For deficiencies considered to pose a threat to patient safety, the HHA/hospice would be required to submit and begin corrective action. If the RO reverses the determination, then the HHA/hospice can abandon the corrective action plan.

6. RO determinations need to be included in the file for public disclosure. If an HHA is able to produce evidence (policies, etc.) demonstrating incorrect policy interpretation by the RO, they should be able to appeal to CMS central.

7. A provider ombudsman system to resolve differences should be instituted.

8. Providers should be permitted to submit objections and/or plans of correction on computer-generated attachments, or provide electronic statements of deficiencies that providers may respond on, directly opposite each deficiency.

RATIONALE: Without an objective review of the providers’ objections, the agencies have no recourse but to accept the determination of a surveyor even if that determination is wrong. Creating and implementing plans of correction may involve costly or time-consuming procedures that are not necessary. Since policy is established at CMS central, ROs should be required to adhere to the Division of Survey and Certification positions on survey finding differences.

Responses to deficiencies are detailed and often require more space than allocated on the statement of deficiency. In addition, because deficiencies cascade from one standard to another, the same plan of correction is often applicable to multiple deficiencies and thus may be repeated. The use of available technology, including electronic reports and responses, should be incorporated into the survey process in order to minimize burden.
REQUIRE FEDERALLY FUNDED CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECKS AND
ESTABLISH A NATIONAL REGISTRY SYSTEM

ISSUE: At times, media attention has focused on the unacceptable, but few, cases of abuse of home care clients, fueling consumer anxiety and industry concern about the need for better consumer protections. Although any fraud and abuse is unacceptable, it’s important to note that cases of consumer abuse in home care are rare – certainly the exception rather than the rule – and in many cases involve caregivers not affiliated with a home care agency. The overwhelming majority of home care workers perform their duties with compassion and integrity; likewise, the vast majority of home care agencies provide reputable, legitimate, quality care. However, as in any industry, there are a few unscrupulous individuals who defraud and abuse the system and its patients.

Some states have enacted laws requiring criminal background checks. These laws vary from state to state, and compliance with them is costly for home health agencies. In some states, an individual may not work until a criminal background check has been completed, and completion may take more than 60 days. The resulting delay may dissuade workers from entering the home health field. Furthermore, criminal background check systems are expensive, cumbersome, and often do not reflect the overall background of the individual screened.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) included a provision for criminal background checks on home health aides in the 1997 proposed CoP. In the meantime, Congress has considered passing legislation mandating criminal background checks on all long-term care workers. Neither CMS nor Congress has implemented mandatory criminal background check requirements. However, the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003 included a provision that calls for establishment of “a pilot program to identify efficient, effective, and economical procedures for long term care facilities or providers to conduct background checks on prospective direct patient access employees.”

CMS selected several states and initiated the MMA provision to establish a Criminal Background Check Pilot Project for the purpose of expanding background checks for workers with direct patient access employed by Medicare and Medicaid long-term care providers. Long-term care facilities or providers include nursing homes, home health agencies, hospices, long-term care hospitals, and other entities that provide long-term care services (except for those paid through a self-directed care arrangement). Long-term care providers in these states are required to fingerprint applicants and conduct registry and state and federal criminal background checks on all direct patient access employees. Under the project, employees are permitted to provide provisional care (care under supervision as defined by the state) until the background check has been completed. Providers are required to disqualify from direct access employment any individual who has been convicted of a “relevant crime” or patient abuse. The Criminal Background Check Pilot Project was completed in September 2007, and an evaluation report of project was published in August 2008.

This was expanded through the National Background Check Program which was established based on a legislatively mandated federal program, as part Affordable Care Act (ACA). The purpose of the program, which is voluntary and open to all states that wish to participate, is to identify efficient, effective and economical procedures for long term care facilities and providers to conduct background checks on prospective direct patient/resident access employees. Grant funding is available to states.

The Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General (OIG) is conducting a congressionally-mandated evaluation of the Nationwide Program for National and State Background Checks on Direct Patient Access Employees of Long-Term Care Facilities and Providers. The OIG is
required to evaluate the impact of conducting background checks to determine whether there are any unintended consequences, including a reduction in the available workforce for long-term care providers. OIG has decided that the best way to ensure identification of problems is to gather information and opinions from long-term care providers as well as the organizations that represent them.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Congress should establish efficient, effective, and economical criminal background check requirements based on the findings of the pilot.
2. Efforts to establish a national registry and background check system administered by the states for all health and long-term care workers, including independent providers, who provide direct care to patients, should be supported.
3. Such a system should be voluntary until an efficient and accessible background check system is in place.
4. Federal and state background check requirements should not be duplicative.
5. New requirements should not impose burdensome supervisory requirements on home care agencies while a background check is pending, and must protect providers from liability during a provisional period of employment.
6. Requirements should mandate that agencies be adequately reimbursed for the cost of the background checks.
7. A standard definition of abuse, neglect, or misappropriation of patient property should be used for purposes of establishing a national registry.
8. Close monitoring and careful analysis of the project should take place with attention to: (a) access to criminal background information, (b) time requirements to carry out background checks, (c) costs to providers, and (d) accuracy of criminal information.
9. The Department of Justice and the FBI should work with provider representatives to establish an educational program that can increase the awareness of background check capabilities.
10. The FBI should decrease the cost of their background check service.
11. Efforts should be coordinated with review of the OIG and GSA exclusion lists.

RATIONALE: As the demand for high-quality home care increases, it is critical that all services are delivered with care and compassion by ethical providers. Fraud and abuse cannot be tolerated in any form. The care environment must be safe for patients and caregivers and free of abuse, exploitation, and inappropriate care. Criminal background checks and a national registry are important components of ensuring consumer safety. Criminal background checks cannot be relied on as the sole method of keeping consumers safe. No matter how effective, the criminal background check should not substitute for the most basic and prudent personnel practices that any responsible employer would undertake to establish the appropriateness, safety, and suitability of an applicant.

In state laws, the trend is toward background check requirements for nursing and home health aides only; however, there is currently no consistent systematic mechanism through which other direct care staff members are checked. It is in the best interest of consumers of home care and other health services for all direct care staff to be screened. However, state and federal requirements should not be cumulative and overly burdensome.
**SUPPORT REQUIRED QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM**

**ISSUE:** The current Conditions of Participation (CoPs) require quarterly clinical record reviews and an annual agency evaluation, but not an overall patient-centered quality management program. The current evaluation of home health agencies (HHAs), although improved with home visits by surveyors, does not adequately assess the quality of care delivered.

CMS requires home health agencies to use standard patient assessment items to identify and report quality measures of care. At the present time, home health agencies must access the quality monitoring reports for outcome and process measures, and include them as part of the agency’s clinical record review and annual program evaluation. The use of these quality measure reports for agency quality improvement activities is voluntary at this time, but the reports are used both for survey preparation and process. In addition, select outcome and process measures derived from the quality reports are used for public reporting.

CMS will be reissuing the proposed home health CoPs in the near future. The use of these quality measure reports will likely be mandatory as part of an agency’s quality assessment performance improvement program, with more specific guidelines to surveyors for incorporation of Outcome and Assessment Information Set (OASIS) and quality measure reports in the survey process. CMS will issue guidelines to surveyors for incorporation of OASIS and quality measure reports in the survey process. In the meantime, Quality Improvement Organizations (QIO) were charged with helping home health agencies implement quality improvement based on outcome measures on a voluntary basis under their 7th Scope of Work. In the 8th Scope of Work, QIOs helped agencies identify and implement best practices to improve the quality of care delivered.

The advent of new projects and programs that will include home health services, such as Accountable Care Organizations, Chronic Care Programs, and the Independence at Home Project, will all require quality measurement and reporting. National measures are being developed for these projects, which do not take into consideration the outcome measures produced from OASIS.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Requirements for quality improvement based on patient outcome and process measures should allow flexibility in design of the quality management program.

1. Evaluation of agency “quality assessment performance improvement” programs should be based on their effectiveness, not prescribed design and content.
2. Broad parameters of quality improvement requirements should be specified, but providers should be allowed to design their own quality management program.
3. The following conditions must be met in implementing an outcome measurement system:
   a. Indicators must be reliable and valid.
   b. Outcome and process measures should be limited to those that most accurately predict quality.
   c. An accurate method for risk adjustment must be available.
   d. Standard assessment items must be limited to those items needed for quality measurement and risk adjustment.
   e. The system must be simple, and reports must be easily accessible and have clinical utility.
   f. A mechanism must be available for CMS to validate agency data.
   g. Ongoing evaluation and refinement of the entire system must take place so that changes can be made as needed.
4. Reimbursement methodology should ensure appropriate compensation to agencies for the cost of collecting and analyzing data needed for an effective quality improvement program.
5. Outcome reports must be timely, readily available, and in easily manageable format.
6. Surveyors must be trained on appropriate use of potentially avoidable events, outcome measure, and process measure reports as resources for care investigation, rather than as the basis for issuance of citations.
7. Alternate systems that are appropriate, simple, and easy to implement should be investigated for measuring quality for non-Medicare patients.
8. Prompt and useful assistance from QIOs to home health agencies seeking to improve their quality of care should be ongoing.
9. Quality measures and systems in home health must be aligned with those of other healthcare providers.

RATIONALE: The ideal quality management system is based on what happens to the patients served. Several items on the OASIS assessment tool, from which the OBQI and OBQM reports are derived, have been challenged on their validity and reliability. PBQI reports from process measures have not yet received challenges on their validity and reliability. Until a quality performance program is designed that is evidenced based using a variety of measure types, every effort must be made to ensure surveyors realize the limits of assessing quality of care using quality reports generated by the OASIS assessment tool. Additionally, CMS should continue their support of QIOs to assist home health agencies in quality improvement efforts. Failure to align home health quality measures with those of other health care providers in the country will result in quality measures that are not comparable across provider types, and will result in duplicative efforts and increased burden.
ENSURE THE USE OF APPROPRIATE QUALITY INDICATORS AND ACCURACY OF HOME HEALTH COMPARE

ISSUE: In 2003, CMS established a web-based information tool for consumers to aid in their selection of home health agencies for themselves or loved ones. This tool, entitled Home Health Compare, is being used by consumers and other health care professionals, such as discharge planners, to make informed choices. CMS also believes that public reporting through Home Care Compare will stimulate providers to try to continuously improve the quality of the care they deliver.

CMS, in conjunction with the National Quality Forum (NQF), will identify and analyze all available home health quality indicators in order to determine which ones are most appropriate for public reporting. Public reporting of home health quality measures began in 2002 and was limited to outcome-based measures. CMS added 13 process measures to Home Health Compare in October, 2010. Currently, there are 23 quality indicators publicly reported. The indicators consist of 9 outcome measures and 13 process measures. Public reporting of the claims-based emergency department (ED) use without hospitalization measure, rather than OASIS-reported ED use, began in 2012. The Increase in Number of Pressure Ulcers measure of public reporting was discontinued effective in late 2011. In addition, CMS added patient perception of care measures (Home Health Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems) to Home Health Compare in late 2012.

Home Health Compare provides a listing of Medicare participating home health agencies and the geographic area that they serve along with information regarding the performance of the agencies in terms of certain patient outcomes. Actual use of this tool as a guide to provider selection is unknown. Further, there have been some questions raised regarding the accuracy and relevance of the information contained in Home Health Compare. The fact that agencies are listed alphabetically could lead consumers to select agencies that appear early, rather than thoroughly reviewing the full list for the best provider. Testing of the site with Medicare beneficiaries has led to concerns about how it is formatted and whether enhancements are needed to the Medicare.gov site for Home Health Compare.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Continue to work with the home care industry, including providers, to ensure the use of valid, reliable quality indicators.
2. Avoid adding unnecessary and burdensome requirements to collect data on quality indicators that have not been researched and proven to be necessary for public awareness and quality assessment.
3. Present measures in ways that are useful and understandable to the public.
4. Continuously evaluate and update measures.
5. Ensure that measures are adequately risk-adjusted before being reported.
6. Establish thresholds or trigger points for quality reporting instead of averages.
7. Provide assistance to home health agencies in identification and implementation of best practices for improved care.
8. Conduct research into home health appropriate structure measures.
9. Consider alternate ways to list agencies other than alphabetically.
10. Include the average number of patients served by each agency in the profile.
11. Identify the time period during which the data the data was collected for the outcomes reported.

RATIONALE: The usefulness of quality reporting hinges on the accuracy of the quality measures selected, as well as the ability of consumers to relate to them. Measures should not be static, but rather need to change with advances in health care. A system of reporting that does not provide opportunities for improvement does little to help consumers in the long run.
A combination of structure, process, and outcome measures are needed to adequately determine whether care is provided in accordance with currently acceptable standards. However, ongoing scrutiny of publicly reported measures is essential. Large numbers of quality indicators are not necessarily helpful to the public, and can be confusing when trying to identify an appropriate provider of care. In addition, unless proven essential to quality, collection of data is unnecessarily costly and burdensome.

The Medicare Home Health Compare website must be user friendly and provide home health agency information in the most useful manner and with sufficient detail to prove helpful to anyone seeking information about the quality of Medicare providers.
ALLOW HHAs AND HOSPICES TO PROVIDE UNLIMITED SERVICES UNDER ARRANGEMENTS

ISSUE: The Medicare Conditions of Participation (CoP) require that a home health agency (HHA) must provide at least one of the qualifying services directly through agency employees, but may provide the second qualifying service and additional services under arrangements with another agency or organization (42 CFR §484.14(a)). CMS published proposed home health conditions of participation in March, 1997, that require HHAs to provide directly, by employees, 50% of all professional and home health aide services. Since the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act (MMA) of 2003 required final rules must be published within three years of the proposed rule, a new proposed rule for the conditions of participation for home health providers is anticipated in the near future. Medicare hospice regulations require the provision of all core services by employees. CMS interprets service “directly through agency employees” as meaning providing the services “by employees in its entirety,” which essentially inhibits contract arrangements even when needed for emergencies or staffing shortages. The MMA of 2003 permits hospices to enter into arrangements with another hospice program to provide core services in certain extraordinary, exigent, or other non-routine circumstances. Although the legislation provides some increased flexibility, additional relaxation of contracting requirements is needed. Furthermore, home health has not been offered a similar exception.

Home health and hospice experience shows that subcontracting is necessary when temporary staffing shortages exist, community demands result in increased referrals, and patients require the skills of specialty nurses and therapists. The current health care environment has resulted in an increase in managed care and numerous organizational relationships. In order to remain competitive for managed care contracts, providers must contract for services to control costs while enabling patients to receive specialty services. Mergers, acquisitions, and joint ventures are taking place at a rapid pace, resulting in the need for greater flexibility in the provision of services to ensure HHA and hospice survival. Finally, HHPPS requires HHAs to contract for therapy services when their patients need special equipment not available in the home, leaving nursing, aides and social workers as the only possible direct service providers.

The Secretary’s Advisory Committee on Regulatory Reform adopted a resolution in 2002, asking for issuance of a “revised policy declaring that due to the national nursing shortage we are in a period of extraordinary circumstances.”

RECOMMENDATIONS: HHAs and hospices should be permitted to provide unlimited services under arrangements both by individuals or other agencies or organizations. CMS should enforce the home health and hospice regulations that require oversight and control of services by the certified providers regardless of whether the persons providing care are employees or contractors.

RATIONALE: This requirement does not fit within the current health care service economy and workforce market. The “service directly requirement” is a proxy for establishing quality assurance in the provision of care. Medicare maintains an outdated and unfounded belief that an employed caregiver is more capable of providing high quality services to patients than a contracted caregiver. Arbitrary staffing/contractor ratios do not ensure quality of care. Existing and proposed quality, coordination, and supervision regulations and guidelines, if enforced, can serve to ensure quality of care to Medicare beneficiaries.
ESTABLISH BRANCH OFFICE AND SERVICE AREA REQUIREMENTS
BASED ON QUALITY RATHER THAN MILEAGE

ISSUE: In response to the Medicare, Medicaid, and SCHIP Benefits Improvement Act of 2000 (BIPA) prohibiting consideration of time or distance from the parent site as the sole determinant of branch status, CMS revised its guidance to surveyors in the State Operations Manual (SOM). The revision was intended to resolve problems related to previous interpretations of branch office requirements as meaning that branches must be within 50 miles or one hour driving time. However, other problematic requirements are included that fail to take longstanding home health structures and practices into consideration.

According to SOM instructions, home health agencies may not provide services across state lines unless the states involved have entered into formal reciprocity agreements. However, many home health agencies have a long history of providing services in multiple states, either directly from the parent or through branch offices located in the other states, where no reciprocity agreements are in place. In addition, language was added to the manual requiring home health service areas to be contiguous. Yet, many state-approved home health services areas are noncontiguous. Some noncontiguous areas are served by field staff sent by a parent agency, while others are served by staff from a noncontiguous branch.

The GAO report in 2002 identified concerns that the quality of branch office services is not being evaluated when only the parent is surveyed. The issuance of branch office numbers to enable the creation of reports for branches helps to address this issue. In addition, there is no prohibition against reviewing services to patients served from branches, even if in another state.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Allow flexibility to home health agencies in the establishment of organizational structures as long as they meet state requirements.
2. Enforce current regulations related to quality, administrative control, and supervision.
3. Monitor states and Region Offices to make certain that branch office disapprovals are not based on mileage/travel time as well as distances between office and patients’ homes.
4. Require all state agencies to enter into reciprocity agreements as a condition of their contract with CMS.
5. Until agreements are in place, allow all home health agencies currently providing services across state lines where there is no reciprocity agreement to continue to do so through a “grandfather” provision.
6. Eliminate contiguous area requirement.
7. Survey quality of care provided by home health agency branch offices.
8. Establish appeal rights for branch office denials.

RATIONALE: One of the goals of the CMS regulatory initiative was administrative simplification. This will not be achieved merely by re-interpreting old regulations that do not address the current environment. In this age of rapid contact via telephone, fax machines, and pagers, communication between various service sites is instantaneous. Modern transportation and mail services in addition to telecommunication promote effective sharing of administration, supervision, and services between sites. Current site definitions and rules have not kept pace with changes in the health care environment.

HHAs that serve either large geographic rural areas or densely populated metropolitan areas operate branch offices and subunits in order to provide a home base for personnel, close to the patients that the agency serves, (a) where supervision is available, (b) where patient records will be accessible, (c) where supplies are available, and (d) where personnel can meet to coordinate care with others who are serving the patient. Establishment of branch offices is a very efficient, cost-effective means of providing high-quality service while avoiding duplication of administrative positions and functions.
Enforcement of reciprocal agreements and contiguous area requirements will seriously impact access to home health services for many patients in need. Medicare is a national program with uniform conditions of participation throughout all states. As such providers should be permitted to deliver services across state lines. Individual states should not be allowed to decide whether approved providers may deliver services across state lines if those providers are in compliance with state licensure laws. The failure to require reciprocity agreements can deprive residents of one state the availability of home health services centered in a neighboring state, many of which are centered in a metropolitan region that borders another state. Records can be taken to the parent. Since surveyors’ authority to survey certified agencies comes from federal rather than state authority, there should not be a restriction on a surveyor crossing a state line to conduct visits to branch office patients in another state.
ENSURE THE EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS PLAN REQUIREMENTS ADEQUATELY ADDRESSES THE NEEDS OF PROVIDERS OF SERVICES IN THE HOME

ISSUE: The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) issued a proposed rule in the Dec. 27, 2013 Federal Register that establishes national emergency preparedness requirements for Medicare and Medicaid providers and suppliers to ensure that they adequately plan for both natural and man-made disasters.

The proposed rule addresses emergency preparedness requirements that 17 provider and supplier types must meet in order to participate in the Medicare and Medicaid programs. Home health and hospice providers are among the provider types that will be required to implement the emergency preparedness plan as outlined in the proposed rule.

CMS recognizes the variations that exist among the different provider and supplier types and takes those differences into account, while also providing generally consistency in emergency preparedness requirements. The proposed requirements for home health and hospice providers are essentially modifications to the requirements for acute care hospitals. CMS proposes that emergency preparedness for all the designated provider and supplier types will include the following four core elements:

- Risk assessment and planning;
- Policies and procedures;
- Communication plan; and
- Training and testing

Currently, the CoPs for home health agencies and hospices do not have requirements for emergency preparedness plans, except for inpatient hospices. The three accrediting organizations for home health and hospice, The Joint Commission (TJC), The Community Health Accreditation Program (CHAP), and the Accreditation Commission for Health Care, Inc. (ACHC) all have some emergency preparedness planning requirements. However, according to CMS, none of these accrediting organizations completely address all of the proposed requirements.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Ensure emergency preparedness requirements take into account for the uniqueness of providing health care services in the home.
2. Ensure requirements in emergency preparedness requirements such as patient evacuation plans, shelter-in-place plans, and patient supply provisions are presented in context appropriate for home health agencies to implement.
3. Ensure emergency preparedness requirements for home care providers accurately assess the financial burdens associated with compliance.


Any emergency preparedness requirements as a Condition of Participation for home health care must be tailored appropriately for home health care and hospice providers, in order to avoid unrealistic expectations that will ultimately subject an agency to unfair deficiency citations.
ENSURE ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR MEDICARE SURVEY AND CERTIFICATION TO PROTECT QUALITY OF CARE

ISSUE: Medicare is responsible for determining whether home health agencies and hospices meet their respective Conditions of Participation (CoPs). That responsibility includes surveying providers in response to quality of care complaints, periodic resurveys of providers to review continued compliance with the CoPs, and the initial survey and certification of applicants for Medicare provider participation. Medicare uses contracted state agencies to fulfill these responsibilities.

In recent years, Medicare has been under-funded for many of its administrative responsibilities. This trend is expected to continue. With respect to survey and certification, Medicare has found that the contracted state agencies have not been able to handle all of the complaints, periodic surveys, and initial certifications on a timely and comprehensive basis. The main reason for that shortcoming is inadequate administrative funding. As a result, Medicare has curtailed initial certifications in many states, and backlogs on complaint response and the periodic surveys continue to grow. In addition, a follow up survey is required whenever a condition level deficiency has been cited. Now that agencies are subject to alternates sanction, they are at risk for prolonged sanction impositions while waiting to be resurveyed. While initial certification applicants can use the alternative of a private “deemed status” entity, that alternative is costly and fails to address the required resurveys for condition level deficiency citations.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Medicare should take all steps necessary to secure adequate funding from Congress to undertake the full range of survey and certification responsibilities set out in Medicare law.

RATIONALE: Quality of care is the only goal in Medicare survey and certification. There is no reasonable basis for under-funding Medicare survey and certification activities. Further, providers should not need to pay directly to finance the oversight responsibilities of Medicare or be subject to protracted sanctions.
ESTABLISH APPROPRIATE PROCESS FOR APPROVAL OF BRANCH OFFICES BY ACCREDITING BODIES

ISSUE: In 2007, The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) instructed state Medicare survey agencies to prioritize federal survey functions into four priority tiers. Tier 1 consists of statutory mandates, such as surveys of existing home health agencies and surveys related to complaints. State survey agencies must complete the work in Tier 1 before conducting initial surveys of new home health care providers or approving new branches.

Home health care providers seeking initial Medicare certification are advised to attain deemed Medicare status conducted through a CMS-approved accreditation organization in lieu of Medicare surveys by the state survey agencies. The accreditation organizations have processes in place to conduct an initial Medicare deemed status survey for home health agencies (HHAs); however, they do not have the authority or processes to approve a branch location. State survey agencies traditionally approved HHA branches even for those agencies that were deemed Medicare certified through an accreditation organization. If the state survey agency does not provide a branch approval, the agency may not serve Medicare beneficiaries from that location.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. CMS should authorize the accrediting organizations to assume branch approvals for HHAs when the state survey agencies are not able to conduct new agency surveys.
2. Require the accrediting organizations to establish CMS approved procedures for approving a HHA branch.

RATIONALE: CMS has traditionally assumed the role of approving branches even for agencies that have deemed status. As a result, accrediting organizations do not have the authority or procedures for approving branches. Agencies seeking branch approval will either have to wait until the state survey agency can resume this survey activity or provide services to only non-Medicare patients, which may result in access to care problems for Medicare beneficiaries in areas served by the branch.
III. ADMINISTRATION
ENSURE THE ROLE OF HOME HEALTH IN IMPROVED AND INTEGRATED CARE DELIVERY MODELS

ISSUE: The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) calls for sweeping health reform. New health delivery models to be tested under the health reform bill include: (a) chronic care coordination services to high-cost Medicare beneficiaries, (b) better transitions, (c) paying for performance, and (d) increased involvement of primary care physicians. In most cases, the delivery of quality home care services is very dependent upon the collaboration and sharing of health information amongst various health care providers across the continuum of care (e.g. physician practices, hospitals, skilled facilities, rehab facilities, case managers, etc.). Therefore, information sharing amongst physicians and hospitals with home care and hospice providers will be critical to advancing care coordination efforts, reducing costs, and improving healthcare transitions. Home health providers will have many opportunities in models, projects, and programs established in the ACA, including the following:

Accountable Care Organizations (Sec. 3022)
ACOs allow hospitals, physician groups, and other group providers identified by the Secretary to enter into agreements with Health and Human Services (HHS) to be held accountable for quality, costs, and overall care of Medicare beneficiaries.

Independence at Home (Sec. 3024)
The IAH program provides a new chronic care coordination benefit under Medicare for high-cost beneficiaries with multiple specific chronic conditions. Physician/nurse practitioner directed teams provide care to beneficiaries in their homes and coordinate their care across all treatment settings.

Health Homes for Chronically Ill Patients (Sec. 2703)
Planning grants to states to develop a new state plan option to permit Medicaid enrollees with (a) at least two chronic conditions, (b) one condition and risk of developing another, or (c) at least a serious and persistent mental health condition, to select a designated provider or health team operating with such a provider to serve as the individual’s health home for purposes of providing the individual with home health services.

Providing Services to Individuals with a Postpartum Condition and Their Families (Sec. 2952)
Award grants to states, local government and/or non-profits to support education and services that diagnose and manage postpartum conditions. Projects may deliver or enhance outpatient home-based supports, inpatient supports, quality of available supports, and education about these issues.

Community Transformation Grants (Sec. 4201)
The Secretary of Health and Human Services shall award competitive grants to state and local governmental agencies and community based organizations for the implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of evidence-based community preventive health activities, in order to reduce chronic disease rates, prevent the development of secondary conditions, address health disparities, and develop a stronger evidence base of effective prevention programming.

National Diabetes Prevention Program (Sec.10501)
The Secretary, acting through the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, shall establish a national diabetes prevention program targeted at adults at high risk for diabetes in order to eliminate the preventable burden of diabetes. The program shall include a grant program for community based diabetes prevention program model sites.
Healthy Aging, Living Well; Evaluation of Community Based Prevention and Wellness Programs For Medicare Beneficiaries (Sec. 4202)
The Secretary, acting through the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, shall award grants to state or local health departments and Indian tribes to carry out five-year pilot programs to provide public health community interventions, screenings, and where necessary, clinical referrals for individuals who are between 55 and 64 years of age.

Grants or Contracts to Establish Community Health Teams to Support the Patient-Centered Medical Home (Sec. 3502)
Creates a program to establish and fund the development of community health teams to support the development of medical homes by increasing access to comprehensive, community based, coordinated care. The health team is to collaborate with local primary care providers and existing state and community based resources to coordinate disease prevention, chronic disease management, transitioning between health care providers and settings, and case management for patients.

Community Based Transitions Program (Sec. 3026)
Funding will be provided to hospitals with high admission rates and certain community based organizations that improve care transition services for “high-risk Medicare beneficiaries.” A community based entity means an appropriate community based organization that provides care transition services under this section across a continuum of care through arrangements with hospitals. These funds might provide opportunities for home health agencies.

Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (Sec. 3021)
Establish a Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (CMI) in the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). The purpose of the CMI is to test innovative payment and service delivery models, in order to reduce program expenditures while preserving or enhancing the quality of care furnished to individuals. Creates opportunities for chronic care and other initiatives.

Medicaid Money Follows the Person (MFP) Long Term Care Demonstration (Sec. 2403)
Extends the MFP Demonstration Program through September 30, 2016, and appropriates an additional $450 million for each FY 2012-2016, totaling an additional $2.25 billion.

Medicaid Waiver Demonstration Projects for Dual Eligibles (Sec. 2601)
Extends these demonstrations for five years; upon requests from a state, they can be extended for additional five-year periods.

Bundled Payments Medicaid (Sec. 2704)
Demonstration project in Medicaid to pay bundled payments for episodes of care that include hospitalizations, including physician services provided within the hospital. Home health agencies might have an opportunity to partner with the hospital.

Demonstration Program to Improve Immunization Coverage (Sec. 4204)
The Secretary, acting through the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, shall establish a demonstration program to award grants to states to improve the provision of recommended immunizations for children, adolescents, and adults through the use of evidence- based, population-based interventions for high-risk populations.

Demonstration Based on Study of Home Health Agencies (sec. 10315)
HHS Study and Report: By March 1, 2014, HHS must report results of a study with recommendations for legislative and administrative action, regarding home health agency costs for care provided to low-income beneficiaries or those in medically underserved areas, and those with varying levels of severity.
Home Health Medicare Demonstration Project (Sec. 3131)
HHS Secretary may provide for a four-year (beginning no later than January 1, 2015) $500 million demonstration project to test whether making payment adjustments based on the study substantially improves access to care for (a) patients with high-severity levels of illness, or (b) low-income or underserved Medicare beneficiaries.

National Medicare Pilot Program on Medicare Payment (Sec. 3023)
A national Medicare pilot program to develop and evaluate paying a bundled payment for acute, inpatient hospital services, physician services, outpatient hospital services, and post-acute care services for an episode of care that begins three days prior to a hospitalization and spans 30 days following discharge.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Make certain that home health agencies are included in planning and opportunities to be leaders and active participants in ACA models, projects, and programs.
2. Identify types of information and essential clinical elements required for safe and efficient transfers between ambulatory and post-acute settings, and home care/hospice agencies (e.g. home care plan of care document, Outcome and Assessment Information Set or OASIS-C, summary of care, etc.).
3. Establish technical standards to facilitate the electronic exchange of that clinical information in a mutually beneficial format.
4. Pilot/test the electronic information exchange between home care/hospice providers and other clinicians involved in patient-centered care delivery.

RATIONALE: Home health care is the natural alternative to the costly institutional care that has been the focus of Medicare health care expenditures. Medicare home health providers are positioned to care for high-cost beneficiaries in their homes. They are experienced in treating chronic illness in the home setting and coordinating health care based on a plan of treatment.

Leaders in home health are well positioned to participate in and develop new health delivery models. NAHC envisions a future where the integration of electronic health records, remote patient monitoring, and community based skilled nursing services will be the backbone of the national health care delivery system.
DEVELOP AN EFFECTIVE EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS SYSTEM THAT INCLUDES HOME CARE AND HOSPICE AND ENSURES REGULATORY RELIEF

ISSUE: The terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, on September 11, 2001, the subsequent release of active anthrax spores through the U.S. Postal Service, and the multiple natural disasters that have occurred since then have dramatically underscored the vital role of all aspects of the health care delivery system, including home care, in addressing emergency situations. While the response to these unprecedented occurrences has been exemplary, had there been large numbers of injured survivors, the entire health care system would have been taxed beyond capacity. Home care and hospice agencies can be a fundamental foundation that can support the traditional hospital health care system during a time of disaster, since hospitals have very little surge capacity.

Hurricane Sandy (which recently struck the Eastern states), along with preparations for a 2013 influenza season epidemic, has reinforced that meeting the health care needs of individuals in times of crisis will require more efficient use of our nation’s health care resources than currently exists. Home care and hospice providers can play a vital role in implementing disaster preparedness plans. Home care agencies and hospices already assist hospitals to manage surge capacity, administer vaccines and antiviral medications, and are in a position to participate in community outreach programs to disseminate necessary information to the public during an emergency. Yet, there is much that needs to be done to improve and ensure the readiness of Medicare-certified home care professionals in the event of a national emergency.

In the “Homeland Security Act of 2002” (Public Law 107-296), the Department of Homeland Security’s primary mission is to help prevent, protect against, and respond to acts of terrorism within our nation’s communities. Title V of the law (Emergency Preparedness and Response) directs the Secretary of Homeland Security (Secretary) to carry out and fund public health-related activities to establish preparedness and response programs. The Secretary is directed to assist state and local government personnel, agencies, or authorities, non-federal public and private health care facilities and providers, and public and non-profit health and educational facilities, to plan, prepare for, prevent, identify, and respond to biological, chemical, radiological, nuclear event and public health emergencies. Since September 11, 2001, tens of billions of dollars have been provided for first responders, including terrorism prevention and preparedness, general law enforcement, firefighter assistance, airport security, seaport security and public health preparedness. As such, Medicare home care providers should be included in the Secretary’s emergency and preparedness response programs, since they can be found within the private as well as public and non-profit health care centers.

To ensure that sufficient health care items and services are available to meet the needs of individuals in an emergency area, the Secretary of Health and Human Services is authorized under Section 1135(d) of the Social Security Act to temporarily waive or modify certain Medicare, Medicaid, and Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) requirements. These waivers are referred to as the 1135 waivers. In recent years, the Secretary has been quick to invoke 1135 waivers when necessary during declared emergencies, and CMS has improved methods of communicating relief from certain regulations as standard operating procedure. A dedicated webpage where policies and procedures related to emergency response is posted for Medicare providers to visit for up-to-date information during a local or national emergency. However, the 1135 waiver authority, as it pertains to home care providers, is limited to certain Conditions of Participation and HIPAA requirements. The greatest impediment to efficient home care delivery is the burdensome payment regulations, particularly those that have been promulgated since 2010. Additional considerations are needed to truly ensure uninterrupted service delivery and provider viability during disasters.
RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Provide the leadership and resources to ensure fail-safe communication, collaboration, and coordination between the Department of Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, and state and local entities involved in protection of the public’s health.
2. Include home care and hospice in the infrastructure as vital participants in efforts to develop state emergency preparedness plans.
3. Provide resources to ensure that home care agencies throughout the country have a better-prepared workforce to deal with all disaster events and public health emergencies.
4. Make federal resources available to home care and hospice providers for disaster planning, practice, and training.
5. Make federal resources available to support the development of public health outreach as well as fund a technology pass-through for needed technology infrastructure within home care and hospice agencies, e.g., communications systems and paperless documentation software and hardware.
6. Make federal resources available to ensure coordinated disaster planning between hospitals and the home care system, as the maximization of surge capacity in hospitals is dependent on the surge capacity of home care to provide services to those discharged.
7. Establish additional regulatory relief measures for home care providers that can be activated at the time that disaster areas are designated.

RATIONALE: With respect to preparedness and response to disasters affecting the public health, it is critical that home care agencies’ infrastructure be strengthened, and that the special qualities and abilities of health care providers of all types be utilized. As a discipline performed primarily in individual homes and in the community, home care and hospice are essential to disaster preparedness and response efforts. Home care has its foundation in and continues to act as an important element in our nation’s public health system. In fact, as federal funding for an effective public health infrastructure has failed to keep pace with need, the nationwide network of home care and hospice agencies frequently have performed important functions that protect and serve communities.

Today, home care is the only “system” that is oriented to the community in a broad enough way to provide a massive infrastructure. The home care clinician of today is trained in public health service. They are able to assess the patient’s symptoms as well as the environment in which they reside. They conduct patient and safety assessments, skilled care and treatment, educate patient and family, and assist with medical and social supports that are critical to the process of healing the sick and protecting the well. Today, these skills are essential to serve and protect our communities’ health.

Because of medical advances in recent years, we often focus on hospitals. We have made significant investments in inpatient facilities and technologies, sometimes at the expense of our public health system. Today, we find ourselves facing the need to put back in place a network of providers that is trained and able to serve the public in a mobile flexible manner. We need the health care equivalent of the armed forces reserves, and we have that in home care. Integrating and connecting home health providers to other health care systems as well as to state and local governments can go a long way toward securing and establishing a preparedness and response program for the nation.
ESTABLISH REFERRAL STANDARDS AND DISCHARGE PLANNING REGULATIONS THAT ENSURE PATIENT CHOICE AND EQUAL ADVANTAGE TO ALL PROVIDERS

ISSUE: The home health and hospice industry has expressed concern about regulations and practices that may result in steering patients to certain providers. The root issue is patients’ ability to freely choose a qualified home health provider and ensure a level playing field for providers of all types. The Balanced Budget Act (BBA) of 1997 Section 4321(a) requires discharge planning to include provision of a list of all Medicare certified HHAs that request to be listed in the patient’s geographic area. In addition, the discharge plan may not specify or limit qualified HHAs, and must identify cases in which the hospital has a disclosable financial interest in entities to which the patient is referred. Some hospitals have misinterpreted HIPAA regulations, using them as the basis for restricting access of outside home health agencies to hospital patients.

CMS issued a final hospital discharge planning regulation in order to implement one of the BBA requirements in August, 2004. According to the final rule, for patients needing post-hospital hospice, home health or nursing home care, the patient must be given the choices of available Medicare participating post-hospital care providers such as hospice agencies, home health agencies or nursing homes.

Hospitals must include in the discharge plan a list of Medicare-participating HHAs that wish to be listed and are available to the patients in the geographic area in which the patient resides. The list must be presented to all patients for whom home health care is indicated. Managed care patients must be advised of the availability of home health services through entities with contracts with their managed care organizations.

Furthermore, hospitals must inform the patient of their freedom to choose among participating Medicare providers and must document in the patient’s medical record that the list was presented to the patient. Finally, the discharge plan must identify any HHAs in which the hospital has a financial interest. Although CMS indicated that it will evaluate establishment of a similar requirement for Critical Access Hospitals (CAH), compliance is not required at this time because CAHs have separate regulations. There have been concerns expressed about the limitations of patient choice and reported cases where physician’s orders requesting that patients be referred to specific home health agencies have not been followed.

BBA 97 at Section 4321(b) included a provision whereby hospitals will be required to report information on the numbers of patients referred for home health services, the number referred to home health agencies or other entities in which the hospital had financial interest, and the number referred to home health agencies that had financial interest in the hospital.

CMS published a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPR) in December, 2002, to implement this reporting requirement. However, CMS failed to publish a final rule within three years of the proposed rule as required by statute. CMS’ reasoning for failure is that the plan proposed was not feasible due to federal information system limitations. As a result, CMS announced that they intend to go back to Congress and request a change in this legislative requirement before publishing a new proposed rule.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Educate surveyors about the discharge planning requirement and their responsibility to assess for compliance.
2. Have surveyors identify instances whereby physician orders for specific home health agencies were violated.
3. Ensure that enforcement of compliance with discharge planning regulations is carried out in the survey process.
4. Make hospital discharge planning regulations applicable to Critical Access Hospitals.
5. Initiate a study to determine whether patients are denied access to home health services.
6. Require consideration of other possible solutions to implementation of referral reporting requirements and publications of a new proposed rule.

RATIONALE: The Social Security Act, at 42 USCS §§1395a, guarantees freedom of choice by requiring that “any individual entitled to insurance benefits under this title (42 USCS §§1395 et seq.) may obtain health services from any institution, agency, or person qualified to participate under this title if such institution, agency, or person undertakes to provide him such services.” Discharge planning regulations and referral standards ensure compliance with patient rights legislation. Hospital discharge planning regulations for ensuring patient choice, where such regulations provide for the dissemination of information to consumers about home health services available in their communities, help guarantee that all providers will have an opportunity to compete in the market. Reporting of hospital referral data will offer a record of what is actually happening in regard to home health referrals. Patients served by Critical Access Hospitals, many of which have their own home health agencies, should be guaranteed the same freedom of choice as other Medicare beneficiaries.
CONTROL PAPERWORK BY REQUIRING CMS TO FOLLOW THE PAPERWORK REDUCTION ACT

ISSUE: Excessive and duplicative paperwork both increases costs and has a detrimental impact on quality, as it takes more and more staff time away from patient care. The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 (PRA) requires that before a government agency begins or revises an information collection, it must make sure the information is not collected elsewhere and reduce, to the extent possible, the burden on the persons required to provide the information. Approval must be obtained from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Paperwork requirements multiplied for home health agencies with the adoption of OASIS and its accompanying notice requirements. New process measures, face-to-face encounters, and physical therapy assessment requirements further increase home health agency paperwork.

In January, 2002, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson established an advisory committee on regulatory reform to identify excessive and inefficient regulatory requirements, and revise or eliminate those that are unnecessarily burdensome or that interfere with the delivery of quality health care. Although many recommendations were made by the advisory committee, only a small fraction of these recommendations have been implemented by CMS. For example, a number of recommendations were made for streamlining OASIS requirements. However, only a few of the OASIS streamlining recommendations have been implemented to date, and in fact, the number of OASIS items soared to over 130 with the addition of process measures.

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 required CMS to establish payment groups that reflect patient severity and related cost and resource use across post-acute settings. In response, CMS awarded a contract for development of the Medicare Continuity Assessment Record and Evaluation (CARE) tool. This tool may replace OASIS to collect and transfer information about patients moving from acute to post-acute care and between post-acute care settings. It may also serve as a uniform assessment instrument that includes items measuring case mix at hospital discharge, and explains expected resource use and outcomes in each level of post-acute care.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Promote paperwork reduction by eliminating duplicative information and establishing efficient procedures.
2. New policies and forms that may increase paperwork should not be instituted without a cost-benefit analysis that supports implementation and appropriate payment to compensate providers for the added paperwork.
3. Providers should be appropriately compensated for added costs.
4. Electronic crosswalks should be created that allow for automatic transfer of information from required forms, such as OASIS, to any new assessment tools.

RATIONALE: Paperwork reduction and the development of efficient and effective documentation tools and procedures should be a vital part of CMS’ efforts to improve Medicare home health and promote more efficient use of limited financial resources. CMS’ failure to pay providers for added paperwork results in fewer resources for direct care services. The reimbursement system must be adjusted for any new requirements. Needless and duplicative documentation requirements decrease the amount of time clinicians can spend in direct patient care.
SUPPORT PHYSICIANS IN ADOPTION OF E-PRESCRIBING AND E-HEALTH RECORDS RELATED TO HOME HEALTH AND HOSPICE SERVICES

ISSUE: The federal government is promoting the adoption of electronic prescribing and electronic health records by the health care system. Key to this change is physician adoption of electronic prescribing and electronic health records. Physicians have been slow to make this change to the electronic world, and both CMS and the OIG have issued safe harbors/exceptions to permit health care providers, without running afoul of the Stark or Anti-kickback provisions, to furnish non-monetary support to physicians to encourage physicians to make the transition to electronic prescribing and electronic health records. These provisions do not go far enough, and they need to be expanded to hasten physician adoption of electronic prescribing and electronic health records. Both CMS and the OIG have limited the type of providers that can furnish support to a physician regarding electronic prescribing. Only hospitals and group practices may furnish this support. Home health agencies and hospices were excluded.

With regard to electronic health records, the CMS and OIG guidance, which includes home health agencies and hospices, is too restrictive. The software must be interoperable at the time it is provided to the physician, and must include an electronic prescribing capability. Interoperability means generally that the software is not limited to communicating or exchanging data only within a limited health care system or community. Both restrictions hinder home health agencies and hospices from furnishing non-monetary support to physicians to encourage them to adopt e-prescribing and electronic health records.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Include home health agencies and hospices as provider-types that may furnish non-monetary support to a physician under the electronic prescribing safe harbor/exception.
2. Permit home health agencies and hospices to furnish non-monetary support to physicians to adopt electronic health records under a two-step approach:
   a. **Step 1**: Assistance to permit the physician and the agency/hospice to have electronic communication regarding orders and medical records for home health and/or hospice services.
   b. **Step 2**: Assistance for fuller interoperability and electronic prescribing capability as defined under the current safe harbor/exception.

RATIONALE: Direct and ongoing involvement of the home care industry in support of electronic prescribing and electronic health records is necessary to encourage timely adoption of these systems by physicians. The approach by CMS and the OIG is based upon an outdated facility model that ignores the current preeminence of home care in the health care system.
PROHIBIT PUBLICATION OF MULTIPLE PROVIDER REGULATIONS IN A
SINGLE NOTICE UNLESS ADEQUATE NOTIFICATION IS PROVIDED

ISSUE: CMS has been addressing an issue to a single provider type in a Federal Register Notice, which then is applied to multiple provider types upon adoption of the Final Rule. In other instances, CMS listed more than one provider type in the Notice description, but commingled the discussion so that NAHC could not determine which issues were applicable to home health agencies and hospices. Some recent examples of this situation include provider enrollment issues, claims and documentation requirements, and Stark compliance.

In regard to provider enrollment, CMS issued proposed rules regarding enrollment appeals, 72 Fed. Reg. 9479 (March 2, 2007), and commingled the discussion of home health and DME issues. NAHC was unable to clearly discern which proposals affected home health agencies and hospices and which did not, and NAHC so advised CMS in our comments.

CMS adopted rules affecting home health agencies and hospices in the 2009 Physician Fee Schedule Final rule. The final rules contained provisions applicable to home health agencies and hospices that govern provider enrollment and document retention that affects claims.

The 1,700 page 2009 Hospital Inpatient Prospective Payment System Final Rule (August 18, 2008) contained changes to the Stark physician self-referral rules that are not limited to hospitals or hospital issues. NAHC found one change regarding the timing of a physician’s signature on contracts that affects compliance, with an exception to the Stark provisions that applies to home health agencies and hospices, as well as to hospitals. In 2010 and 2012, hospice rules were published in the Home Health PPS Update for 2011 and 2013 respectively, and clinical laboratory rules were published in the 2010 Physician Fee Schedule.

CMS has expressed concerns regarding the long amount of time it takes for a proposed rule to become a final rule. CMS has justified its practices on the ground of expediency.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Clearly list in any notice headings all provider types or issues that will be addressed in the rulemaking.
2. In a rulemaking resulting from a single provider notice, such as a Hospital IPPS Rule or a Physician Fee Schedule, do not finalize rules applicable to other provider types that were not made aware that issues affecting them would be addressed.
3. In a rulemaking resulting from a single provider notice, if new issues arise that are applicable to other provider types, split these issues into a new rulemaking, and give notice to all affected provider types, as well as an opportunity to comment prior to finalizing the rules.

RATIONALE: NAHC appreciates the opportunity to comment upon proposed rules that affect the home care industry, allowing us to raise issues that CMS can address prior to adoption of final rules. NAHC is unable to perform this function when final rules applicable to the home care industry are adopted in a rulemaking seemingly applicable to other provider types. Nor can NAHC meaningfully comment when the discussion in the notice is not clear regarding which issues affect home health agencies and hospices. Although giving meaningful notice and comment may cause some delay in the adoption of final rules, CMS must bear this delay to comply with due process.
REQUIRE MEDICARE TO FULLY ASSESS AND REPORT ON THE
IMPACT OF ITS NEW RULES

ISSUE: Most home health agencies and hospices are considered small businesses under federal law. The Small Business Regulatory Flexibility Act requires that any federal rule affecting a small business must undergo a regulatory impact analysis that is prepared and published at the proposed and final rule stages of rulemaking. Medicare rulemaking has failed to include an adequate, in-depth impact analysis in any of its home health services and hospice rulemaking. Instead, Medicare has simply published a statement of the broad financial impact of the rules rather than a comprehensive evaluation of the rule’s impact on the provider’s ability to maintain its operation and meets its responsibilities of providing care to Medicare beneficiaries.

This continually perpetuated in the annual HHPPS rate update NPRM rule by simply quantifying the percentage cut in rates on a geographic basis, and broadly evaluating the impact of the proposed changes in case-mix weights on categories of home health agencies such as freestanding, hospital-based, nonprofits, and urban and rural providers. Further, the NPRM impact analysis offers little substantive understanding of the cost impact of existing and proposed rules such as the physician face-to-face encounter requirement, revisions to therapy assessment, coding change proposals, and OASIS and CAHPS compliance. The estimated costs are vastly understated because they do not include the sizeable administrative expenses that home health agencies will incur to implement any of the changes beyond the cost of some of the form revisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. The Small Business Administration should take steps to define the responsibilities of federal agencies regarding the regulatory impact analysis requirements to ensure that a full and reasonable analysis is developed and presented for public review.
2. CMS should modify its impact analysis approach to include an in-depth evaluation of a rule’s impact on business viability, as affected by any and all changes triggered by a rule. The impact analysis should:
   a. Begin with the highest of priority concerns which is impact on access to care.
   b. Continue with an evaluation of the effect of the NPRM on Medicare spending in a whole sense, not just the effect on home health services spending.
   c. Evaluate the impact of the NPRM on the ongoing viability of the individual businesses and the industry as a whole.
   d. Include impact on workforce.
   e. Address access to capital.

RATIONALE: A rulemaking impact that is limited to aggregate effects regarding businesses that operate individually in diverse locales is of no value to understanding the impact of a rule. Further, an analysis that is limited to one year of a multi-year rule fails to display the true impact of the rule. That method of evaluating the impact of a proposed rule falls far short of adequacy in relation to the impact on the businesses that provide home health services. A valid and useful impact analysis starts with an understanding of the results of the combination of rate cuts and cost increases that the NPRM will bring to home health agencies.

Impact on access to care is the central purpose of Medicare and the HHAs that provide the care. For example, if the analysis of the NPRM’s impact on access to care shows that thousands of Medicare beneficiaries who need therapy services will no longer have home health care available, or that it will be significantly delayed, Medicare spending will rise as a result of a shift to higher-cost care such as skilled nursing facility services or extended inpatient stays.
Among the many elements that should be reviewed is whether the business will be paid less than the cost of the delivery of care. It is critical to determine whether health care workers will take their talents to other care sectors because of reductions in compensation and benefits.

If the proposed rule changes restrict access to capital, there may be reduced use of efficiency-related technologies or business expansions to achieve economies of scale. Lack of access to capital could also mean an inability to meet ongoing payroll obligations because of cash flow problems.
ENSURE REASONABLE SCREENING, MORATORIA AND COMPLIANCE PLAN PROVISIONS FOR HOME HEALTH AGENCIES AND HOSPICES

ISSUE: CMS has expressed growing concerns about the entry of fraudulent providers into the Medicare program. Congress addressed some of these concerns in the Affordable Care Act, adopting (a) provisions requiring screening of new providers, (b) the assessment of application fees to cover this expense, (c) temporary moratoria, and (d) compliance plans. CMS issued a final rule governing these provisions.

CMS has strengthened provider and supplier screening through establishment of a risk matrix that assigns providers and suppliers to risk levels based upon findings and experiences of CMS and other enforcement agencies. The nature of the intensified provider screening is dependent on the risk level assigned to that provider/supplier sector. In the rule, home health agencies are assigned to a risk level depending on whether they are an existing home health agency (Moderate) or a new applicant for participation in Medicare (High). Hospice is assigned the Moderate risk level.

Each risk level is subject to three screening elements: (1) verification of provider/supplier specific Medicare requirements, (2) license verifications, and (3) database checks. Moderate risk level screenings add unscheduled or unannounced site visits. For high level screenings, two additional screening elements include criminal background checks and fingerprinting of certain owners and managers.

The risk categorizations of home health agencies and hospices are based on some oversight activities by the Office of Inspector General (OIG) and others over the years. Most of these providers are proposed for the Moderate risk level, thereby subjecting them to unscheduled or unannounced site visits. Reports of “phantom” home health agencies are likely the result of site visitors’ failure to understand that home health services are provided in the home and that offices are not required to be staffed at all times as long as operating hours are posted and a contact number is displayed for visitors.

Since services are delivered in the home and providers are subject to initial on-site surveys in their offices and the homes of patients, NAHC raises the question as to whether anything is gained by such on-site visits. If there is anything that might be productive as a means to uncover the rare instance where a home health agency or hospice is fraudulently billing for “phantom” patients, it would be to conduct visits with existing or recent patients in their homes, since most care is provided to patients in their homes.

CMS issued a six month moratoria on new home health agencies for Miami–Dade, Florida and Cook Counties, Chicago, effective July 30, 2013. CMS has the authority to continue the moratoria for unlimited extensions in six-month increments and apply it to additional locations.

The OIG continues to review recommendations submitted in response to a solicitation for corporate compliance plan requirements, and plans to issue a new proposed rule specifically addressing compliance plans, with opportunity to comment.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Include competency credentialing in the provider screening model.
2. Establish a credentialing screen at the “Limited” risk level for all new providers and suppliers. The credentialing should include minimum training and competency testing of owners and managers in all areas of Medicare/Medicaid operations, including coverage standards, claim submission, cost reporting, and compliance requirements under the anti-kickback laws and the Stark law provisions.
3. Coordinate screening standards with other rules regarding Medicare program participation.
4. Ensure that its enrollment requirements are consistent with its conditions of participation (CoP).
5. Don’t exclude providers that have submitted the appropriate CMS Form 855A prior to the public notice of any moratorium.
6. Apply certain standard exceptions to a moratorium such as:
   a. The state has a Certificate of Need program, and the state determines that there is a need for additional providers.
   b. The provider is establishing a branch office or multiple locations within its geographic service area.
7. The seven core elements of a compliance plan (as set forth in the Sentencing Guidelines) should provide the framework and should be the basis for mandatory compliance plan requirements for all providers, ensuring consistency across provider types.
8. Effective compliance plans should begin with these core elements, which are tailored to address provider-specific risk areas.
9. Compliance plan requirements must be periodically re-evaluated and revised as needed.
10. The cost of the compliance plans must be included as part of the factors when developing the payment rates under the new reimbursement models.
11. Provide sufficient outreach and education, and at least 12 months for providers to implement a compliance plan following the publication of any final rule.

RATIONALE: Denial or revocation of billing privileges is too severe a punishment for what is merely a mistake in the inclusion of all documentation with its application.

While there have been instances where certain “phantom” suppliers have been uncovered through surprise site visits, there is no evidence of abusive, fraudulent phenomena occurring in home health services or hospices.

The home care industry strongly supports the use of temporary home health agency moratoria authority in targeted geographic areas. In the past decade, certain areas of the country have had dramatic growth in the number of home health agencies. Evidence suggests that in certain areas, the demand for home health services follows the supply of the agencies, with utilization levels far in excess of other parts of the country.

Coordination of screening efforts in consideration of other requirements reduces burden and confusion. For example, a hospice that requests approval to operate in multiple locations may not furnish services to Medicare patients at that location until CMS approves the location pursuant to 42 CFR 418.100(f)(1)(i). As a result, an on-site visit to an expanded hospice location before it was approved would not find it fully “operational” in the sense of 42 C.F.R. §424.502.

For providers of services participating in Medicare, maintaining a comprehensive compliance plan as part of their Medicare enrollment requirements goes a long way to reducing fraud, waste and abuse. However, imposing compliance plan requirements that are overly burdensome will only add to increased costs without decreasing abuses.
ENSURE REASONABLE ENROLLMENT AND PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS
FOR HOME HEALTH AGENCIES

ISSUE: CMS has adopted a series of regulations and manual provisions governing the enrollment of home health agencies to address concerns of fraudulent providers entering the Medicare program. In 2010, CMS adopted revised provisions governing the capitalization, also known as the initial reserve operating funds (IROF), to be maintained by new home health agencies, and also significantly revised the 36-month rule applicable to changes of ownership and sales of stock of home health agencies.

In regard to capitalization, CMS has adopted a burdensome approach that requires the agency to have the IROF available at the time the 855A is filed, when the contractor recommends approval to the Regional Office (RO), before the RO approves the application, and before the contractor conveys Medicare billing privileges and issues the billing number. Due to the lengthy time for processing the enrollment application, this is burdensome on agencies, and contractor enforcement of this provision may impose additional burdens and delays in processing new HHA enrollments.

CMS has adopted various versions of the 36-month rule to address concerns about the new owner of a home health agency. In 2010, CMS adopted multiple versions of its interpretation of the rule, causing a freezing of the financial markets. These interpretations included versions that made the rule effective upon a 5% or more change in ownership, a 100% change in ownership, indirect ownership changes, or stock sales; it also required the termination of an agency and the filing of an initial enrollment if one of the owners died.

NAHC and others worked with CMS throughout the year to bring to the attention of CMS the numerous problems caused by their various interpretations of the rule. CMS has retained the so-called 36-month rule, with significant exceptions. If there is a change in majority ownership of an HHA by sale (including asset sale or sale of stock, mergers, and consolidations) within 36 months after the effective date of the HHA’s initial enrollment in Medicare or within 36 months of the HHA’s most recent change in majority ownership, the HHA’s provider agreement does not convey to the new owner. The new owner must enroll in Medicare as a new (initial) agency and obtain state survey or accreditation.

However, CMS adopted significant exceptions to the 36-month rule in cases where:

1. The HHA has submitted two consecutive years of full cost reports (low utilization cost reports or no utilization cost reports do not qualify). This is a reduction from five years of cost reports to two years of cost reports.
2. An HHA’s parent company is undergoing an internal corporate restructuring such as a merger or consolidation.
3. The owners of an existing HHA are changing its business structure such as from a corporation to a partnership, from an LLC to a corporation, or from a partnership to an LLC, in each case where the owners remain the same.
4. An individual owner of an HHA dies.

CMS further clarified that:

1. Indirect ownership changes are not subject to the 36-month rule.
2. If there is a change in ownership between partners that changes one person’s ownership interest from 40% to greater than 50%, the rule applies unless an exception applies.
3. The exception for submitting two full years of cost reports applies to both public and private companies.
4. The 36-month rule applies to nonprofit as well as for-profit entities.
5. CMS would comply with court orders approving the sale of an HHA, including from a bankruptcy court, regarding an HHA that would otherwise be subject to the 36-month rule. CMS would not adopt a bankruptcy exception, nor would CMS adopt an exception to permit a bank or lender to foreclose on a defaulted loan and permit the lender to sell the HHA.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Monitor for appropriate application of the 36-month rule and its impact on access to home health services.
2. Require each contractor to post an IROF calculator on its website so that HHAs can determine the capitalization amount as part of their business analysis regarding whether to open a new HHA.
3. Monitor its four-time contractor review of IROF. NAHC believes that this quadruple review of IROF is unnecessary, unduly burdensome, and will further delay the processing of new HHAs. NAHC recommends that CMS have contractors check the IROF twice: when the application is filed and prior to conveying billing privileges.

RATIONALE: The wholesale revisions of the exceptions may be viewed as a wholesale revision of the rule. As devised, the final 36-month rule may allow most bona fide transactions to take place and permit lenders and investors to stay involved with home health care, with a reasonable degree of security that their collateral or investment does not become worthless. Due to significant problems with past implementation of the 36-month rule, it is important to monitor implementation of the rule to address any potential problems that arise.
ENSURE REASONABLE APPLICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF HOME HEALTH SURETY BOND REQUIREMENT

ISSUE: The Balanced Budget Act of 1997, P.L. 105-33, mandated that all home health agencies and certain other entities participating in Medicare and/or Medicaid secure a minimum surety bond of $50,000 in order to protect the programs from fraud. The provision was effective January 1, 1998.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) published implementing regulations for home health surety bonds in the Federal Register on January 5, 1998, that went far beyond the intent of Congress. While the legislation required a minimum $50,000 bond and allowed CMS to waive the requirement in states where a similar requirement already exists, CMS expanded on that authority in the regulations by requiring a bond which is the greater of $50,000 or 15% of previous year’s Medicare and/or Medicaid revenues. CMS placed no cap on the amount of the bond. Additionally, the regulations were crafted so that the length of time for which the surety company was liable could be as long as six years. As a result, many surety companies would not write surety bonds for home health; other companies required that agency administrators or owners provide personal guarantees or post collateral two or three times the full value of the bond. Most home health agencies were unable to secure bonds. In the regulations, CMS waived the requirement for government-run agencies (even though the statute did not expressly allow this), but CMS made no attempt to exempt providers with proven good track records.

In an effort to address concerns about the January, 1998, regulations, CMS published changes that responded to the criticisms of the surety industry, but that failed to address home health agencies’ concerns. The Small Business Administration (SBA) petitioned CMS to withdraw the rules, citing, among other concerns, the threat the regulations posed to agencies as small businesses.

Both the Senate Special Committee on Aging and the Senate Committee on Small Business held hearings on home health surety bonds. Witnesses from the SBA, home health and the surety industries all expressed concern over CMS’ regulations. Finally, in the wake of overwhelming Congressional objection and the threat of passage of resolutions introduced by Senator Kit Bond (R-MO) and Representative Jim Nussle (R-IA) formally disapproving the surety bond regulations, CMS was forced to withdraw the compliance date for agencies to meet the bonding requirement. CMS agreed to await the results of a Congressionally-requested General Accounting Office (GAO) study prior to developing new regulations.

The GAO study was issued in January, 1999, and recommended the following:
1. Retaining the “financial guarantee” nature of the bond, rather than restricting it to a fraud bond.
2. Eliminating the requirement for separate bonds for Medicare and Medicaid participation.
3. Exploring the possibility of exempting agencies that have demonstrated financial stability.
4. Eliminating the option of substituting a Treasury note or other federal public debt obligation in place of a surety bond.

As part of efforts during 1999 to refine the BBA, the Congress made the following changes to the home health surety bond requirements:
1. Limiting the bond to the lesser of $50,000 or 10% of previous year’s program revenues.
2. Requiring that agencies secure bonds for four consecutive years, rather than for the full length of Medicare and/or Medicaid program participation.
3. Requiring that agencies secure only one bond to fulfill their obligations under Medicare and Medicaid.

The Affordable Care Act, section 1128J(g), expanded the Medicare authority to impose surety bonds on home health agencies in allowing the bonds to be set at amounts “that the Secretary determines is
commensurate with the volume of the billing of the home health agency.” The purpose of this change was to overcome any perceived obstacle to the imposition of a bond in excess of $50,000.

The HHS Office of Inspector General followed the ACA amendment with a report entitled, “Surety Bonds Remain an Unused Tool to Protect Medicare from Home Health Overpayments” (September 27, 2012. The OIG suggested that a surety bond on home health agencies would reduce the amount of uncollected overpayments in Medicare.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should:
1. Apply the surety bond requirements only to agencies with poor records of repayment to Medicare and/or Medicaid or to new agencies wishing to participate in the program(s).
2. Apply any surety bond requirement for a time-limited period of no more than three years consistent with the recommendation of the GAO.
3. Utilize the surety bond only as a screen to bar inappropriate providers from the programs to protect against fraud, not as insurance against any programmatic losses through unrecouped overpayments.
4. Honor the notice and comment requirements in the Administrative Procedures Act in promulgating regulations to implement the surety bond requirement.
5. Comply with all procedural requirements of the Small Business Regulatory Enforcement Act in developing regulations for the surety bond requirement.
6. Establish objective criteria for agency eligibility for a repayment plan.
7. Explore more targeted approaches to resolving the root causes of problems related to recoupment of overpayments, including requiring that agency operators have sufficient knowledge of Medicare prior to opening an agency. Serious consideration should be given to alternatives that are better measures of an agency’s competence and worthiness to participate in Medicare than imposing surety bond and similar requirements. Alternatives to a surety bond approach include requiring the demonstration of financial management ability and knowledge of Medicare coverage and participation requirements.

RATIONALE: Unrecouped Medicare home health overpayments amount to less than 0.2% of home health outlays and are the result of issues presented by a very small number of providers. Also, CMS has many tools available to avoid overpayments altogether and to significantly reduce the risk of uncollected overpayments, such as strengthened authority to suspend payments and real-time data access to catch overpayments quickly. Given these facts, applying an across-the-board surety bond requirement that is onerous and difficult for many agencies to meet is counterproductive and will limit the availability of important home health services. Home health, for the most part, is not a capital-intensive industry. Rather, many agencies are small businesses that are established because of a commitment to providing vital services to needy beneficiaries. These agencies have limited financial reserves. Meeting any requirement that focuses primarily on capital does not necessarily demonstrate an agency’s understanding of Medicare policies, nor does it gauge an agency’s motivations for getting into the home health business. Unrealistic or excessive requirements could preclude all but the most highly-capitalized providers from entering the program, discouraging many highly scrupulous and capable providers from participating in the program and threatening beneficiary access to care.
ADVANCE THE ADOPTION AND USE OF HEALTH IT IN HOME HEALTH AND HOSPICE

ISSUE: Over the past decade, health information technology (HIT) has been promoted as an essential tool to improve quality, reduce preventable medical errors, and contain rising costs in the U.S. healthcare system. Despite the infusion of government funding to support HIT adoption through the HIT Adoption Initiative, HITECH Act, and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA), home health and hospice providers have not greatly benefited from the implementation of key programs, including: the Meaningful Use EHR Incentive program, state health information exchanges (HIEs), regional extension centers (RECs), and other new standards for interoperable health information exchange.

Meaningful Use eligible professionals (EPs) and hospitals have been the primary recipients of federally subsidized HIT investments and programs. In addition to receiving fiscal incentives, hospitals and physicians are also eligible to receive technical assistance from regional extension centers (RECs). The RECs were created to provide guidance, training, and support services to assist EPs in adopting EHRs. However, because of their focus on assisting EPs, RECs are unaware of the similar technology needs of home health and hospice providers. Since RECs will have to become self-sustaining after their grants expire in FY-2013, there is an opportunity for them to develop and execute comparable outreach and technical assistance strategies to engage and assist home health care and hospice providers.

The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) has made an impact on the inclusion of home health care and hospice providers in the Beacon Community Program and through their state HIE Challenge Grants. ONC is providing $250 million over three years to 17 selected communities throughout the United States that have already made inroads in the development of secure, private, and accurate systems of EHR adoption and health information exchange. Several of the Beacon projects, such as in Western New York and Eastern Maine, have participation from home health agencies. Also, the HIE Challenge Grants were awarded specifically awarded to HIEs that were engaging home health and hospice agencies and Long-Term Post-Acute Care (LTPAC) providers in the exchange of clinical data with other providers.

ONC has also provided resources and expertise through the S&I Framework in order to engage stakeholders that were not incentivized by the Meaningful Use Program. In December of 2011, ONC launched a new community initiative within their established Standards & Interoperability (S&I) Framework called the Longitudinal Coordination of Care (LCC) Workgroup (WG). The LCC WG was chartered to represent the data exchange needs of Long-Term Post-Acute Care Providers (LTPAC) and its work has focused on three primary areas of interest: patient assessments, care transitions and the longitudinal care plan. The LCC WG is changed with the development of standards of health information exchange that support these main objectives, and with seeking their integration into the Meaningful Use program objectives. Therefore, NAHC, through its affiliated Home Care Technology Association of America (HCTAA), has been collaborating within the S&I LCC WG and advocating for funding for the development of standards to support the electronic Home Health Plan of Care (HH-PoC) and Care Transition standard for the benefit of home health care and hospice providers. As of fall 2013, both standards have been developed by HL7 and are entering the piloting phase. Also, the Health IT Policy Committee has recommended the Care Transition standard for inclusion in Meaningful Use Stage 3.

Although no federal funds have ever been allocated to support EHR adoption among home health and hospice providers, a group of stakeholders worked with the Certification Commission for Health IT (CCHIT©) to develop an initial set of standards and certification criteria for a LTPAC EHR. These standards were designed to satisfy special care requirements among LTPAC (e.g. SNF, home health, etc.) while also going beyond Meaningful Use EHR certification criteria in order to meet clinicians’ health IT needs across the care spectrum. The CCHIT© Certified EHR Home Health Add-On was released in July,
2010, and to date, only three EHR products have been certified under this program. Despite the regulatory-compliant standards of the CCHIT© LTPAC EHR Certification, ONC and CMS have not recognized or incorporated these standards. However, HHS/ONC is considering the development of a voluntary EHR certification program for long-term post-acute care (LTPAC) and behavioral health providers. HCTAA has been active in advocating for the development of a voluntary program as well as an expansion of the definition of interoperable health information exchange to include providers currently outside the scope of the Meaningful Use EHR Incentive program.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Coordinate with ONC and CCHIT to ensure that the LTPAC Certified EHR standards for home health are updated to support EHR standards (e.g. Consolidated CDA, SNOMED-CT, LOINC, RxNORM);
2. Promote the development and adoption of a certified LTPAC EHR standard for home health and hospice and seek recognition of the certification program from CMS/ONC;
3. Expand the scope of HITECH programs to include ineligible providers, such as home health and hospice, in the Meaningful Use Program;
4. Identify a subset of OASIS-C data that are the essential clinical measurements required for safe and efficient transfers between ambulatory and post-acute settings, and home health care / hospice providers (e.g. summary of care record, etc.);
5. Support standards of interoperability to exchange health information with hospitals and physician practices;
6. Revise the (Consolidated-CCD) clinical document standard for the exchange of the HH-PoC and summary care record between home health care providers, physician groups, hospitals and other LTPAC providers;
7. Ensure that the HH-PoC is supported as a national standard of exchange by state IHEs and also supported in EMR/EHR products in use in home care providers and by physicians.
8. Identify technical assistance and resources needed by home health care and hospice providers to support EHR adoption and the electronic exchange of health information;
9. Encourage homecare and hospice providers to engage in HIE governance and taskforces.
10. Provide educational resources to homecare and hospice providers for 5010 and ICD-10 conversions;
11. Explore strategies to incorporate interfaces for telehealth and remote monitoring data into EHRs, and;
12. Collaborate with CMS/ONC to provide REC technical assistance to home health care and hospice providers, especially in rural areas.

RATIONALE: In most cases, the delivery of quality homecare services is very dependent upon the collaboration and sharing of health information amongst various health care providers across the continuum of care (e.g. physician practices, hospitals, skilled facilities, rehab facilities, case managers, etc.). Therefore, information sharing amongst physicians and hospitals with home health care and hospice providers will be critical to advancing care coordination efforts, reducing costs and improving care transitions. NAHC envisions a future where the integration of advanced communication technologies and community-based skilled nursing services is leveraged in the home setting as the backbone of the national health care delivery system.
ADOPT DUE PROCESS PROVISIONS BEFORE SUSPENDING PAYMENT

ISSUE: Both the existing and the proposed rules on suspension of Medicare/Medicaid payments fall far short of reasonable due process.

RECOMMENDATION:
1. Notice of the proposed payment suspension prior to the imposition of the suspension, except in cases where there is reliable evidence of fraud.
2. The notice must provide the specific basis for the suspension with detailed explanation as to the evidentiary basis for the action. All standards for suspension should be fully disclosed and should not be vague and indefinite. The standards in the proposed rule fail that test.
3. Reliable evidence of fraud must be established through concurrence of at least two independent government agencies/departments.
4. A party subject to a payment suspension must be entitled to a fair hearing before an administrative body with a right of judicial review within a reasonable time period following the suspension, but no greater than one payment cycle. The hearing and judicial review includes evaluation of the basis and authority for the payment suspension.
5. The grounds for “good cause” not to suspend payment should be more fully articulated and focus, at a minimum, on access to care for beneficiaries and the history of claims reversals in the administrative appeals process.
6. The standards for terminating a suspension also should be articulated more fully and provide the benefit of the doubt to the provider.

RATIONALE: A payment suspension for home health agencies and hospices is generally a death sentence as Medicare/Medicaid is usually the sole or primary payer. NAHC has reviewed a number of instances where the claim determinations that trigger a suspension of payments or the consideration of a suspension are clearly erroneous or unreliable.
ENSURE THAT HOME HEALTH AND HOSPICE ARE INCLUDED AS REQUIRED HEALTH BENEFITS BY HEALTH PLANS

ISSUE: Section 1302 of the Affordable Care Act requires qualified health plans to include the following ten essential health benefits (EHBs): (1) ambulatory patient services, (2) emergency services, (3) hospitalization, (4) maternity and newborn care, (5) mental health and substance use disorder services, (6) prescription drugs, (7) rehabilitative and habilitative services and devices, (8) laboratory services, (9) preventive and wellness services and chronic disease management, and (10) pediatric services. Home health and hospice coverage is not included in the ten essential health benefits.

The Affordable Care Act instructs the Secretary that the EHB must equal the scope of benefits provided under a typical employer plan. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) announced an intended regulatory approach of utilizing a reference plan based on typical employer-sponsored coverage in the marketplace today, supplemented as necessary to ensure that plans cover each of the ten statutory categories. CMS invited public input to this intended approach through solicitation of comments. However, at this point CMS believes that the following four benchmark plan types for 2014 and 2015 would best reflect the statutory standards for EHB:

1. The largest plan by enrollment in any of the three largest small group insurance products in the state’s small group market.
2. Any of the largest three state employee health benefit plans by enrollment.
3. Any of the largest three national federal employee health benefits plan options by enrollment.
4. The largest insured commercial non-Medicaid health maintenance organization operating in the state.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Require the inclusion of home health and hospice benefits in health plans adopted by states.
2. Avoid cost sharing for home health and hospice services.
3. Update benefits as new information becomes available about interventions and consumer preferences.

RATIONALE: According to a recent national study, home health is a benefit in 77% of health plans and hospice in 66%. Home health has proven to be effective in reducing health care expenditures by reducing hospitalizations, shortening hospital stays, and serving as an alternative to costly post-acute inpatient stays. In addition, cost savings are realized at end of life through the delivery of hospice services. Failure to include home health and hospice coverage will result in increased cost and fewer options to enrollees. Furthermore, failure to include home health and hospice benefits is inconsistent with the Administration’s focus on home and community based services and could be in violation of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA).
IV. COVERAGE AND APPEALS
ENSURE CLAIMS REVIEW DECISIONS AT ALL LEVELS OF APPEAL THAT ARE CONSISTENT AND IN COMPLIANCE WITH MEDICARE COVERAGE REQUIREMENTS

ISSUE: Recent claims denials by Medicare Administrative Contractors (MAC), Program Safeguard Contractors (PSC), Zone Program Integrity Contractors (ZPIC), Recovery Audit Contractors (RAC), and review of claims denials by Qualified Independent Contractors (QIC) and Administrative Law Judges (ALJ), are inconsistent and are not in compliance with Medicare coverage requirements as stated in the statute, regulations, and manuals.

In addition to the Medicare Administrative Contractors, which process claims and conduct pre-payment and post-payment reviews, CMS has implemented four other audit contractor types – all of which have essentially the same function and serve the same purpose.

There is growing concern about inappropriate ZPIC, RAC, and CERT coverage interpretations, denials, and sampling. Below are several examples:

The CERT Program produces a national Medicare FFS improper payment rate. Often CERT requests for documentation are sent to incorrect addresses.

ZPICs in certain areas are denying claims for beneficiaries they believe to be not homebound. The homebound status of the beneficiary is based on a previous claim denial for non-homebound status and does not include a review of the medical record for the services being denied.

RAC issues approved by CMS have a number of problems, such as:
1. The overly broad Medical Necessity and Conditions to Qualify for Services that provides the RAC with discretion to deny claims based on their interpretation of all qualifying and coverage criteria; and
2. Payment denial of claims where the OASIS was not completed within the five-day window despite CMS policy that payment would be based on OASIS timely submission, not completion.

CERT contractors have inappropriately requested home health agencies to provide physicians’ medical records to support his/her face-to-face encounter documentation in addition to the agencies’ face-to-face encounter documentation and clinical records.

Finally, a new audit contract has been awarded (the Supplemental Medical Review Contractor), and has been tasked to perform a large volume of Medicare Part A, Part B, and Durable Medical Equipment reimbursement claims reviews nationally. The focus is to lower improper payments in Medicare fee-for-service programs and increase efficiencies in medical review functions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Train each of these contractors on the coverage contained in the statute, regulations, and manuals, and require the contractors to apply these coverage requirements in their review of claims.
2. Monitor compliance with their sub-contractors by auditing a statistically valid random sampling of the claims decisions of each contractor. CMS should discuss inconsistencies and coverage errors with each sub-contractor. High coverage errors should be taken into account when the contractor requests a subsequent contract with Medicare. ALJs who have high coverage errors should receive additional coverage training.
3. Monitor the various contractors for redundancies in claims review and provider burden.
RATIONALE: Medicare is a national federal program. Determination of coverage should be consistent across the country so that beneficiaries are guaranteed access to all services to which they are entitled. Inconsistencies lead to confusion and unfair eligibility determinations by home health agencies.
ENSURE HOME HEALTH ACCESS FOR HOMEBOUND BENEFICIARIES

ISSUE: In order to qualify for home health services, Medicare beneficiaries must be confined to their home. CMS recently issue clarifying guidance on the definition for homebound. CMS defines a beneficiary as homebound “because of illness or injury, need the aid of supportive devices; the use of special transportation; or the assistance of another person in order to leave their place of residence or have a condition such that leaving his or her home is medically contraindicated……and leaving home must require a considerable and taxing effort”. According to the longstanding Medicare policy, if a person leaves their home, “absences must be infrequent or for periods of relatively short duration,” unless for medical purposes. Congress attempted, but failed, to impose strict numerical limitations on how often a home health beneficiary could leave home for non-medical reasons at “no more than approximately 5 times a month and no more than about 3 hours each time.”

The Balanced Budget Act of 1997 (PL105-33) replaced this earlier legislative proposal and recognizes persons absent from home for adult day care and religious services as homebound if certain criteria are met. CMS revised its homebound policy to allow for unlimited absences to attend adult day care and religious services. However, the current policy remains vague for all other absences, potentially leaving Medicare beneficiaries as prisoners in their homes in order to qualify for home health services and home health agencies at the mercy of arbitrary decisions by CMS contractors. In addition, adult day programs must be licensed, accredited or certified in order to meet CMS criteria. However, many states do not license or certify adult day programs, leaving beneficiaries who attend adult day care in those states without the ability to access the home health benefit.

Face-to-face encounter requirements legislated by the Affordable Care Act became effective January 1, 2011. According to CMS regulations to implement the statute, physicians must not only certify that patients are homebound, but must also write a narrative description of clinical findings that support a patient’s homebound status. However, most physicians are ill-equipped to do so in light of the complexity of homebound rules and lack of education on the homebound policy.

For the most part, medical review staff at the CMS contractors (MAC, RAC, and ZPIC) do not have an acceptable understanding of homebound criteria. These contractors have been known to issue inappropriate denials because of their lack of understanding of Medicare “confined to home” policies.

In an attempt to improve understanding of homebound requirements, CMS revised the Medicare Benefit Policy Manual to clarifying the homebound definition.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Work with the industry to establish homebound definition and guidelines that:
   a. Ensure access to home health services, as intended by the Social Security Act, based on functional limitations and the clinical condition of the patient as documented in the patient record rather than arbitrary number and duration of absences.
   b. Do not impose burdensome documentation requirements, such as detailed information about reasons, frequency, and duration of non-medical absences from the home.
   c. Expand the definitions of “licensed” and “certified” adult day programs.
   d. Ensure that analysis of the impact of any expansion of the homebound definition addresses the financial impact on providers as well as the Medicare program.

2. Require CMS to provide educational information to physicians and all of its contractors, and oversee their application of the homebound policy.
RATIONALE: Congress rejected the inflexible definition proposed by the Administration for “homebound” that prescribed limits to the frequency and duration of non-medical absences from the home. Functional status and medical condition are appropriate criteria for determining whether a person can leave home, without undue hardship or negative health consequences. Physicians’ failure to understand the flexibility of CMS’ homebound policy will incorrectly deny access to home health services to beneficiaries. Inappropriate denials and subsequent appeals based on homebound status are costly to providers and the Medicare program. Erroneous denials issued by Medicare contractors for services to beneficiaries who do meet homebound criteria could result in access problems. Failure to expand the definition of “licensed” or “certified” adult day care centers creates access barriers to beneficiaries living in states without these processes.
PROMOTE CONSISTENT APPLICATION OF COVERAGE RULES AND ABANDON LOCAL COVERAGE POLICIES

ISSUE: The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) issued revised home health coverage guidelines in 1996 that incorporated the codified coverage rules published in December of 1994 (42 CFR §§409.40 to 409.50). Coverage rules were further expanded by the addition of existing polices on management and evaluation, and teaching services to regulations in the 2010 HHPPS payment update. Interpretation of the coverage rules and explanations varies among Medicare contractors and managed care organizations. As a result, home health utilization and coverage varies dramatically among regions and among Medicare managed care enrollees. In many instances, CMS contractors and MA plans create their own set of policies.

One of the official responsibilities assigned to CMS contractors is the development of local medical review policies (LMRP), now called local coverage decisions (LCD), for the purpose of clarifying Medicare coverage policies. In addition, CMS urges contractors to adopt LCDs developed by others, thus creating national coverage policies without completing the formal process required for National Coverage Decisions. CMS has instructed its contractors to ensure that LCDs are “consistent with all statutes, rulings, regulations, and national coverage, payment and coding policies.”

According to CMS, more than 8,000 LCDs have been developed over the last 11 years. There are numerous examples where LCDs have resulted in more stringent interpretations of coverage than is spelled out in the Medicare Benefit Policy Manual (Pub 100-2). These LCDs are intended to apply in a particular contractor’s jurisdiction. In the case of home health, where three Regional Home Health MACs and one Medicare Administrative Contractor serve the entire country, LCDs are applied to large geographic areas.

Local policies are reviewed by CMS regional offices upon request only. They are not subject to review by CMS central office. However, CMS central has been called upon to intervene on numerous occasions when MACs developed inappropriate local policies. Many local policies were contrary to Medicare policy and/or limited beneficiaries’ access to care. Examples of local policies that required CMS intervention include diabetic supplies, physical therapy, foot care, psychiatric nursing, and homebound status.

Furthermore, managed care organizations have reinterpreted coverage rules, resulting in enrollees in MA plans being deprived of entitled services. Some require unwilling patients/caregivers to learn to perform skilled procedures. In addition, many define aide services as custodial, uncovered care.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Abandon use of local coverage decisions (LCD) and prohibit CMS from abdicating its responsibility to establish coverage policies to its contractors.
   a. Educate contractor staff on coverage rules.
   b. Instruct MACs to provide clarifications using existing Medicare Benefit Policy Manual (Pub 100) coverage and payment rules, rather than new and potentially more restrictive policy.
2. Until LCDs are abandoned:
   a. Require Medicare contractors to receive CMS approval for new local coverage decisions.
   b. Establish formal procedures that allow providers to seek CMS review of questionable contractor interpretation of coverage policies.
   c. Ensure compliance with procedures that enable providers to review and comment on proposed local medical review policies.
   d. Establish procedures that enable providers to challenge inappropriate local policies.
3. Require MCOs to provide home care services consistent with Medicare guidelines.
RATIONALE: Policies developed and implemented by Medicare contractors are not local due to the extensive geographic areas that they serve. Medicare contractors do not have the legal resources that are available to CMS and essential to ensuring appropriate interpretation of the Medicare benefit and establishment of coverage policy. Federal law requires adherence to formal processes for the establishment of national coverage decisions. Coverage policies that are applied to large areas of the country, and in some cases the entire country, should be established only through this process. Medicare coverage is a complex issue. Although treatment standards and practices vary from one part of the country to another, Medicare is a national program and beneficiaries should receive all services to which they are entitled. When contractors do not adopt LCDs from other MACs, inconsistency in coverage results within geographic areas since provider assignment to Medicare contractors is not on a strictly geographic basis.

Medicare beneficiaries that enroll in managed care plans should be guaranteed the same home health benefit as fee-for-service beneficiaries.
REFINE CLAIMS REVIEW AND ADDRESS TECHNICAL ERRORS

ISSUE: Currently, less than 4% of all Medicare home health claims and 1% of hospice claims are reviewed. It is cost prohibitive to perform a claim-by-claim review. Although DME claims review has been on the rise, it will increase to a greater extent as a result of the latest Comprehensive Error Rate Testing (CERT) program, which determined the payment error rate on DME claims to be 51.9%. It is believed that the steep increase in the DME error rate from 9% in a previous report had to do with changes in review methodology for DME claims. The latest CERT program resulted in increased errors in home health and hospice claims as well.

Claims denial must be based on the information contained in forms and records and based on the individual beneficiary's medical condition. Those claims that are reviewed require submission of extensive records that is costly and time-consuming for providers, suppliers and Medicare contractors. Payment is often delayed when MACs fail to review records in a timely manner.

Top billing errors in home health care have consistently included: failure to submit requested records, lack of physician signature prior to billing, and most recently insufficient documentation on the F2F encounter document. These billing errors represent technical mistakes as opposed to fraudulent billing practices. Other examples of claims that result in issuance of technical denials include: failure to record the date of verbal order on the plan of care, lack of physicians’ signatures on all verbal orders prior to billing (including minor treatment changes), and lack of a date of the providers’ receipt of signed orders in cases where physicians have not dated their signature. These denials are often appealed and overturned, a process that is time-consuming and costly for providers, contractors, and ultimately, the Medicare program. A new regulation was promulgated at 42 CFR 424.22(b)(1) eliminating the option of date of receipt by home health agencies of a physician’s undated signature. Agencies may not bill for home health services unless the physician affixes the date to his/her signature.

The Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003, Sections 931-940, included a number of provisions related to appeals, recovery and contractor reform. In one provision the Secretary was to establish a process so that providers and suppliers can correct minor errors in claims that were submitted for payment. However, CMS has not interpreted and implemented this provision as intended by Congress. What CMS has done is limit the application of this provision to denied claims, rather than all claims that have been adjudicated, whether paid or denied.

CMS has instructed Medicare contractors to direct medical review efforts towards claims where there is the greatest risk of inappropriate program payment. Under this approach, called “Progressive Corrective Action” (PCA), MACs are to use smaller corrective actions for smaller problems and bigger corrective actions for bigger problems identified within an agency. Under the principles of PCA, data analysis should be used to identify aberrancies in an agency’s billing patterns, and MACs should then validate suspicion of billing errors by first conducting probe reviews of small numbers of claims (between 20-40). Although probe edit instructions to CMS contractors advise a maximum of 20-40 claims per topic, they do not prescribe a minimum number of claims, resulting in increasing instances of focused review of providers based on high percentage of denials when only a handful of claims are reviewed. Individual providers that appear to have billed inappropriately are notified and remain on focused medical review (FMR) for a minimum of three to four months.

Finally, MACs have been known to down-code home health claims when documentation contained in the patient’s OASIS assessment is not duplicated elsewhere in the medical record, or when the medical record does not contain documentation of treatments and interventions corresponding to every OASIS item. This down-coding continues to occur in spite of clarification from CMS that other parts of medical records need not contain information duplicative of what is found in OASIS. Furthermore, OASIS assessments
capture information about a patient’s condition at a particular point in time. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to deny ordered and provided services when a problem is not identified in OASIS if that problem developed subsequent to completion of the patient assessment. At the same time, CMS is increasing its efforts to oversee the contractors that process and pay Medicare claims for providers and suppliers. Each year, CMS publishes and/or revises the criteria and standards for evaluating contractor performance. CMS has identified at least one measurable standard as “the rate of reversals of denied claims at the Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) level.” This standard defines an acceptable reversal rate as one that is at or below 5%. Data from CMS found the percentage of reversals for home health and hospice denials at both the reconsideration and ALJ levels far exceeded 5%.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. Identify data elements that can be submitted electronically in response to a request for medical review.
2. Require Medicare contractors to reach at least a 10% denial rate before targeting and maintaining a provider for focused medical review.
3. Direct focused medical review efforts at non-technical issues and allow providers to correct minor technical errors without denials, including dating of physician signatures.
4. Ensure use of the principles of progressive corrective action (PCA) guidelines established by CMS to guarantee provider-specific focused review, as well as cost-effective utilization of limited resources.
5. Commit resources to educational activities and timely dissemination of information.
6. Establish minimum standards for Medicare contractor medical review staff.
7. Develop a procedure for providers to explain utilization variations prior to making decisions to place them on FMR.
8. Limit medical review to 4% of claims except in cases of demonstrated cause.
9. Require additional education of Medicare contractor medical review staff in the appropriate and correct review of OASIS documentation as a part of the medical record as a whole.
10. Complete prepayment reviews within 30 days of receipt of records.
11. Correct the instructions to contractors and providers to accurately reflect the intent of Congress.
12. Involve the provider community in defining “minor errors.”
13. Treat claims that are presently issued as technical denials because they are missing information as “incomplete claims.”
14. Notify providers of the reason their claims cannot be processed and require resubmission, rather than issue denials.
15. In cases where a technical problem is discovered on post-pay review, require repayment and allow providers to resubmit these claims for payment once the incorrect or incomplete information has been received.

**RATIONALE:** Claims review must be refined in its targeting to become productive, rather than to remain a labor-intensive and cost-intensive activity. However, claims review must continue to act as both an ongoing educational device and a deterrent to abusive claims submission. Home health claims may not be submitted until the close of an episode, which in many cases is 60 days. Therefore, pre-pay review can result in a minimum of a 120-day delay in payment even when Medicare contractors comply with a 60-day turnaround time.

Providers and suppliers are under severe financial hardships when payments are delayed inappropriately for weeks and, in some cases months, while under the review process. Prompt response to inquiries and access to educational materials and programs will improve accuracy in submission and payment of Medicare claims. Denials based on technical errors result in unnecessary and costly appeals. However, should providers identify an underpayment resulting from a technical error, they should be permitted to
correct that error through claims processing rather than appeals procedures for up to the four-year limit as allowed by statute.

While the OASIS is the sole basis for determining case-mix and, therefore, appropriate payment to a home health agency, it is not the sole determinant of the scope of services an agency is responsible to provide. The medical record as a whole should support the patient’s unique medical, nursing and social needs.

Treating claims with missing information as “incomplete claims” is more efficient than issuing a denial, and could reduce the number of costly appeals filed by providers. Congress’ intention was that providers should have the right to correct all technical errors and omissions, and not just those related to claim submission or denials. Congress intended to expand provider rights. It is financially burdensome and non-productive to the Medicare program to subject providers to focused medical review without first identifying significant numbers of billing errors and without taking into account appeal reversals.
ESTABLISH REASONABLE THERAPY SERVICE REQUIREMENTS

ISSUE: In the 2011 Home Health Prospective Payment System (HHPPS) update for calendar year 2011, CMS wrote about concerns described in the notice as “current ill-defined therapy criteria.” To address these concerns, CMS made extensive modifications to 42 CFR 409.44 with the goal of “slowing the rate of nominal case-mix growth.” The regulatory changes include:

1. New functional assessment and reassessment requirements.
2. Additional therapy goal and clinical documentation requirements.
3. Establishment of timelines for reassessment visits by a “qualified therapist” on the 13th and 19th visits of an episode and every 30 days.
4. Required physician collaboration about therapy needs based on patient progress and restoration potential.
5. New physician signature requirements when goals change during the course of an episode.
6. Clarification of maintenance therapy coverage criteria.
7. Addition of non-coverage criteria for conditions that are transient or reversible (e.g. post-surgical debility).
8. Limitation of billing of a therapy visit to provide wound care to instances where the skills of a therapist are required to provide the ordered wound care.

The therapy profession supports assessment and goal requirements imposed by CMS in the 2011 HHPPS Update. The regulation requiring patient assessment, physician collaboration, plan of care, goal establishment, evaluation of progress toward goals through objective measures, and documentation, are all reflective of professional standards of practice for therapy services that are in line with practice guidelines established by professional therapy associations, including the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), the Occupational Therapy Association (OTA), and the American Speech and Language Association (ASLA), and they are promoted by NAHC. However, CMS has not issued clear guidelines as to how extensive reassessments must be, other than to say that it must be a reassessment of function. This could result in subjective interpretation and additional requirements by its contractors.

The scheduling of reassessment visits by qualified therapists on the 13th and 19th visits and every 30 days has proven difficult, especially if the 30th day of service occurs just prior to the 13th or 19th therapy visit in an episode, necessitating multiple therapy reassessments in a short period of time. Reports have been received from many agencies of problems they are experiencing due to the strict reassessment timelines. For example: unexpected and uncontrollable changes in visit plans due to patient problems, therapist availability, planned and unplanned interruptions in the plan of care, hospitalization, and weather and environmental factors result in non-coverage of delayed assessment visits, even though covered services were provided. In addition, compliance with 13/19 requirements often results in lumping of multiple reassessments in short periods of time in multiple therapy cases, while allowing a single therapy service to go without a reassessment for a full 30 days. (In one case, nine therapy assessments/reassessments were required within a two and a half week period for a patient receiving all three therapies.) In addition, after the fact recognition of non-coverage of a visit or visits, such as through retrospective audits, may alter the assessment timelines and leave an agency out of compliance.

Although CMS allowed for flexibility in scheduling (10th to 13th and 16th to 19th therapy visits in rural areas and under circumstances outside the control of the therapist), CMS did not elaborate on what those circumstances might be. Further, compliance is required even when circumstances are outside the control of the therapist. Furthermore, conduct of patient assessments on visits 13 and 19 may not coincide with therapy assistant supervision requirements. For example, some states require the qualified therapist to conduct a supervisory visit every 6th visit when therapy assistant services are employed.
CMS, in the 2013 HHPPS rate update, restricted the time frame for which the reassessments must be conducted in multiple therapy cases. In a case where there is more than one therapy discipline, the qualified therapist from each discipline must conduct the therapy reassessment after the 10th but before the 14th therapy visit, and after the 16th but before the 20th therapy visit. This requirement is a change from the original rule and is a more restrictive requirement. Previously, the therapy reassessment could be conducted “close to” but no later than the 13th /19th therapy visit, leaving agencies with much more flexibility in compliance in multiple therapy cases.

On another note, the 2011 HHPPS update addressed maintenance therapy coverage and requirements that must be met in order for maintenance therapy services to be covered and billable. This update has been interpreted by the beneficiary advocacy groups as the imposition of additional limitations on coverage of therapy services for the chronically ill.

A new requirement related to therapy in cases where patients have what is called a “transient condition” (at 42 CFR 409.44(c)(2)(iii)(A)(3)) was also promulgated. According to this regulation: “Where a patient suffers a transient and easily reversible loss or reduction of function which could reasonably be expected to improve spontaneously as the patient gradually resumes normal activities, because therapy services do not require the performance or supervision of a qualified therapist, therapy would not be considered reasonable and necessary.” This regulation could result in inappropriate denial of care to patients with medical conditions or post-surgery, under the presumption that they are transient conditions and spontaneous recovery will take place without therapy services. A variety of illnesses, such as pneumonia, thrombophlebitis, and post-operative conditions are easily reversible when treated with medications and rest. However, these conditions often leave patients temporarily de-conditioned and incapable of carrying out routine functional activities during the recovery period. Therapy services may be medically necessary to teach safe transfer, promote mobility, make environmental accommodations and identify equipment needs in order to prevent falls and meet activities of daily living needs during the recovery period.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Work with the home health industry to identify quantifiable patient measures.
2. Amend the therapy reassessment timelines to create a more comprehensive, yet simpler to manage, approach to ensuring payment protections and the delivery of medically necessary care, according to a schedule that is in the best interest of the patient rather than to meet payment requirements, as follows:
   a. Each therapist should be required to conduct a functional assessment of the patient during that therapist’s 2nd and 4th weeks of treatment, and in cases where therapy will continue into a new episode, the final week of the episode, or five-day OASIS window if that therapist is performing OASIS;
   b. In order to accommodate therapy assistant supervision requirements (in those states where professional licensure laws require the therapist to observe the assistant to perform patient treatment), amend the regulation to allow a qualified therapist to perform the assessment and treatment, OR allow the qualified therapist to perform the assessment and observe the assistant providing treatment;
   c. In cases where there is no order to provide therapy services at the required time points, or a patient is not available for therapy services, or documented environmental factors preclude a visit, payment would not be denied when the qualified therapist conducts the therapy assessment on the next covered visit.
3. Issue clear guidance on timing of therapy reassessment requirements.
4. Limit reassessment requirements to assessment of function, not a comprehensive assessment, using tools and measures deemed appropriate by professional therapy standards of practice.
5. Address coverage for conditions that may not directly impact functional status, such as pain and fall potential.
6. List diseases, injuries, or condition categories and when they would be considered to be transient, rather than relying on the subjective judgment of claims reviewers who may be disabled by 20-20 hindsight when determining coverage of therapy for transient conditions.

7. Expand on policies that address the role of therapists in wound care, including coverage of electrical stimulation of pressure ulcers, sharp debridement, and whirlpool therapy for wounds that do not inappropriately limit therapy practice, and consider any newly imposed limitations in case-mix budget neutrality.

8. Ensure that maintenance therapy policies are written to reflect the full scope of the benefit, not limit it.

RATIONALE: Reassessment of patients at prescribed timelines fails to take into consideration unique conditions and circumstances of home health therapy patients. Scheduling of visits by a qualified therapist in consideration of three different set of criteria (30 days of service, 14th and 20th visit threshold, and state therapy assistant supervision requirements) will cause scheduling problems that even home health software vendors may not be able to resolve through software programs. In addition, the compounding nature of 30th day and therapy visit threshold requirements have resulted in duplicative reassessments at a frequency that is unnecessary for many patients and costly to agencies.

CMS is required to ensure access to reasonable and necessary therapy services based on the individual’s unique condition. Maintenance and restorative therapy, as well as therapy to prevent injuries and further deterioration, all require the skills of a therapist. Coverage of maintenance therapy and maintenance plan development was a significant component of the nationwide class action lawsuit settled by predecessor HCFA, Duggan v. Bowen. This type of therapy is provided to beneficiaries with deteriorating or chronic conditions to ensure their safety and ability to maintain current function. In a more recent lawsuit, Jimmo v. Sebelius, it was reaffirmed that an improvement standard may not be applied for patients receiving maintenance therapy.

Exclusions of therapy for transient conditions assume that recovery will take place fully and within the same timeframe without provision of therapy. It establishes a rule based upon the unfounded assumption that the patient’s recovery does not benefit in any way from the provision of therapy. Many reversible illnesses require therapy interventions to promote full recovery and prevent further complications or injuries.

Wound care has been provided by therapists since the start of HHPPS and case-mix weights have been developed based on the cost of these therapy services. Wound care is within a physical therapist’s scope of practice, and for which many therapists have special training and certification. Any changes in policy on wound care that is within the scope of a therapist’s scope of practice will impact case-mix budget neutrality.

Home health agency quality measures now address processes of care. Agencies are required to report whether they assess patients for pain and fall potential and provide care when needs are identified. Services to assess for and address pain and fall potential should be paid.
V. OTHER
PROMOTE PROVIDER RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO COMPETE THROUGH EFFECTIVE ENFORCEMENT OF ANTITRUST LAWS

ISSUE: The health care reform environment has brought about the advent of new systems of delivery of health care services. Mergers of health care providers, vertical and horizontal integration of health care entities, entrance of insurance companies into the provider market, and the growth of managed care plans have resulted in intensified competition, closed markets for provision of services, and new challenges for health care providers to adjust to the reform systems. Managed care, in particular, presents risks of monopolization that do not exist in the traditional fee for service market. Individual home health and hospice providers with limited geographic coverage or limitations relative to the extent of services provided may not adequately compete in this new age. Antitrust laws are designed to foster competition and prevent restraints on trade by competitors. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and Department of Justice (DOJ) have, until recently, focused little on health care services in their antitrust law activities. However, public statements from the federal government indicate an intention to reevaluate its efforts in health care.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) includes authority to develop and support integrated care delivery through such arrangements as accountable care organizations and bundling of payments. Whenever integrated care occurs, the competitive marketplace among providers is impacted. The FTC and DOJ issued a “Statement of Antitrust Enforcement Policy Regarding Accountable Care Organizations Participating In The Medicare Shared Savings Program” 76 Fed. Reg. 67026 (October 28, 2011). The Policy Statement describes (1) the ACOs to which the Policy Statement will apply, (2) when the agencies will apply rule of reason treatment to those ACOs, (3) an antitrust safety zone, and (4) additional antitrust guidance for ACOs that are outside the safety zone, including a voluntary, expedited antitrust review process for newly formed ACOs. Home health services and hospice care are not specifically addressed in the Statement. However, the general principles appear to require that any restraint of trade analysis examine such services separate and distinct from inpatient care or physician services.

Similarly, CMS has initiated several projects with “bundled” Medicare payment of post-acute care services. The bundling of payment may require the integration of competing providers in order to properly managed the bundled payment in a manner that allows for economies of scale and sharing of business information. The DoJ antitrust guidelines do not provide adequate guidance on these new delivery models from the perspective of PAC.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The FTC and the DOJ should promote rights and opportunities to compete through effective antitrust laws by issuing additional guidance and further “safety zones” that directly focus on the changing relationship between home health and hospice providers, bundled payment service providers, managed care systems, and payer sources. Specifically, there should be guidelines that define acceptable activities involving the integration of payers with home health and hospice providers. State regulations should provide similar protection.

RATIONALE: Home care providers are looking toward changes in their delivery of services in order to compete for contracts with managed care systems and to participate in the integrated care approaches encouraged by ACA such as ACOs and PAC bundled payment initiatives. Further, individual home care providers are at a disadvantage in the market, in comparison to vertically integrated health care systems that can offer a managed care plan and a range of services that fit the managed care plan’s overall design. Collaborative activities among home care providers can bring about efficiencies and economies of scale that are pro-competition. However, continued and vigorous enforcement of antitrust laws is necessary to insure continued survival of competition in home care services.
DEVELOP QUALITY OF CARE STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MEDICAID PERSONAL CARE SERVICES

ISSUE: CMS has encouraged states to give Medicaid beneficiaries more control over the long-term care services they receive. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) includes provisions expanding support for Medicaid home care services. The Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003 included development of a demonstration project for consumer-directed personal care under the Medicare home health benefit. In 2008, CMS promulgated a rule allowing for the provision of consumer-directed care as part of the optional benefits that can be elected by a state Medicaid program. This rule leaves great discretion to states in establishing quality of care protections. Still, this new benefit option requires states to allow a Medicaid beneficiary to choose an agency model for the delivery of personal care. However, no such requirement exists for the many Medicaid home care programs (such as waiver programs) provided under other authority. The ACA includes numerous provisions to expand home and community services.

Some states contract directly with individuals to provide paraprofessional services ranging from social support to “hands-on” personal care rather than using home care organizations for the provision of such services. In some cases, the services delivered by these individual providers require highly trained health care workers, such as in cases where insulin injections, catheter care, nasogastric tube insertion and feeding are needed. These services are financed through a variety of programs at the federal, state, and county levels. Many states have determined these workers to be employees of the client, thereby delegating the traditional duties of the employer (such as hiring, training, supervising, firing, securing backup workers when the primary care provider is not available, performing background checks, and, in some cases, transmitting payment for services and making employer tax contributions) to the client.

Some states have also required home health providers to act as fiscal agencies for consumer-directed caregivers. This arrangement has resulted in a great deal of confusion as to the role and responsibilities of the home health agency. Legal liability, such worker’s compensation responsibility and liability for clinical errors, has resulted.

Advocates for people with disabilities strongly support growth in personal care services and consumer direction of personal care, and have worked diligently to make the model more widely available. Clearly, it provides recipients who are capable of directing their care more choice and greater independence. NAHC also supports the availability of high-quality, accountable, consumer-directed care for Medicaid beneficiaries who are capable of and choose to use a self-directed care model. However, states’ decisions to use this model are too often driven by cost considerations rather than consumer needs or quality.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Beneficiary participation in consumer-directed care should be strictly voluntary.
2. All states that contract with individuals to provide paraprofessional home care services through publicly-funded programs must provide adequate assurances that consumers receiving care from such individuals are assessed to be capable (for example, a person receiving highly skilled services such as catheter care must be capable of directing the caregiver in the performance of that task) and willing to assume the required employer responsibilities, such as payment of overtime.
3. Consumers should also be given the option to choose among service models (consumer-directed, home care agency, etc.) to ensure what best meets an individual’s needs.
4. States should provide a mechanism for resolving any problems that arise between a consumer and providers, and should devise a method for ensuring that backup workers are available.
5. Consumers directing their own care and their caregivers should be afforded the same important protections (such as those recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and those
imposed by OSHA regarding blood-borne pathogens) that are required when care is provided through an agency.

6. Consumers should be educated as to their responsibilities if a private caregiver model is chosen.

7. Caregivers should be trained, tested, and competent to provide services.

8. Home care providers must be freed from responsibility and liability for care provided by consumer-directed caregivers.

9. Require all models of care to comply with applicable state and federal labor laws and health and safety regulations.

10. States should be required to maintain well-defined and effective systems for program integrity and accountability to ensure that beneficiaries receive high quality of care consistent with their needs, and without any wasteful spending that puts the program at risk for all.

11. Criminal background checks should be required commensurate with those applied to other provider organizations.

RATIONALE: A goal of home care is to foster independence in the least restrictive environment while safely meeting the consumer’s needs. Consumers have the right to choose the model of care that best suits those needs. Individuals who are capable and choose to do so should be permitted to self-direct care. However, those who are unwilling or unable to assume the many responsibilities associated with this model should be able to select other options. For the safety of consumers and caregivers, the training, testing, and quality standards to which agencies are held should apply to all models of care. It is unfair to require agencies to be responsible for services over which they have no control. Further, as these programs grow in size and scope, evidence of abuses has surfaced. CMS and state Medicaid programs need to take steps to secure full accountability in these programs in order to preserve them for qualified beneficiaries.
OPPOSE CHANGES TO COMPANIONSHIP SERVICES EXEMPTION TO
THE FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT

ISSUE: In 1974, Congress established an exemption for companionship services from the Minimum Wage and Overtime Requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act. Congress made a societal choice in balancing the interests of the worker relative to the needs for care to the elderly and the infirm. Current law provides the Secretary of the US Department of Labor (DOL) the authority to define and determine the scope of the companionship exemption.

In June, 2007, the US Supreme Court ruled that the DOL companionship services exemption regulation was valid, thereby reversing the Court of Appeals in a final decision.

Since the Supreme Court ruling, there has been a re-focusing of efforts by some opposed to the DOL rule. Currently, they are attempting to get Congress to change the law while also seeking legislative and/or regulatory remedies at the state level. Legislative efforts in the 110th, 111th and 112th Congresses intended to eliminate the current companionship services exemption for home care aide workers are opposed by NAHC because they do not go far enough to protect workers.

Some states already have passed laws that eliminated the companionship services exemption. In others, there are efforts to interpret the regulations in a manner different than the federal rules.

Advocates for changing the exemption have expanded their efforts with the Obama administration to encourage DOL to change the regulation. These efforts include enlisting the aid of 15 Senators to send a letter to the Secretary of Labor requesting that the exemption be modified through regulation to exclude home care aides employed by agencies or family of the client. DOL issued a proposed rule on December 27, 2011, that would significantly restrict the exemption and make it inapplicable to workers employed by home care companies.

The proposed rule was made final on October 1, 2013 with an effective date delayed until January 1, 2015, 78 Fed. Reg. 60453 (October 1, 2013). In the absence of a mandate that government payment programs increase payment rates to cover the added cost of wages that would result from these efforts, home care aide employers are expected to restrict working hours to avoid overtime pay. Further, these efforts do nothing to create career opportunities for home care aides or to address their need for health insurance. This isolated action related to a single element of the home care aide working conditions will have a reverse negative impact on those workers.

In the absence of a mandate that government payment programs increase payment rates to cover the added cost of wages that would result from these efforts, home care aide employers are expected to restrict working hours to avoid overtime pay. Further, these efforts do nothing to create career opportunities for home care aides or to address their need for health insurance. This isolated action related to a single element of the home care aide working conditions will have a reverse negative impact on those workers.

Legislation has been introduced in the 112th Congress that is intended to codify the current definition of companionship services. NAHC is supportive of the “Companionship Exemption Protection Act” (H.R.3066) because it creates certainty for home care providers and patients rather than leaving the definition open to changes through the regulatory process.

The Department of Labor published in their Unified Agenda that a final rule is expected to be issued in April, 2013.
RECOMMENDATIONS: A companionship services exemption under wage and hour laws should be restored at the state and federal level until a comprehensive plan can be implemented that addresses service funding, worker health insurance, and career development. The Department of Labor should reverse its rule change that effectively eliminated the application of the companionship services exemption to home care. Alternatively, the Administration and Congress should ensure that govern-funded home care programs adequately reimburse Employers for an added cost of overtime compensation and provide financial protection to consumers of private pay services through tax credits or other subsidies. Finally, the Department of Labor should develop and the Congress should enact reforms to the FLSA that establish a reasonable compensation structure for home care that respects the uniqueness of that employment setting where the patient/client is the primary focus of responsibility. That reformed structure should also properly address the unique aspects of “live-in” care where employees reside in the home of the client, receive room and board, and take on caregiving responsibilities throughout a 24 hour day.

RATIONALE: Most home care providers are small business with limited resources. The companionship exemption result would be to reduce the availability of care to the elderly and the infirm, and to increase the costs of service delivery with no corresponding increase from third-party payers, such as Medicaid. A comprehensive rather than a piecemeal approach to worker compensation and working conditions is necessary if access to high quality of care and continuity of services are to be achieved.
MONITOR EFFORTS TO AUDIT IMPROPER EMPLOYEE CLASSIFICATIONS AS INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS

ISSUE: The US Department of Labor (DOL) initiated an education, oversight and audit project in 2010 that will continue throughout 2011 related to the misclassification of employees as independent contractors. Among the employment areas targeted by the DOL is home health care.

A major step was taken in September, 2011, with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the DOL and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Under this agreement, the agencies will work together and share information to reduce the incidence of misclassification of employees, to help reduce the tax gap, and to improve compliance with federal labor laws.

Additionally, labor commissioners and other agency leaders representing 11 states have signed MOUs with the Department’s Wage and Hour Division, and in some cases, with its Employee Benefits Security Administration (EBSA), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP), and the Office of the Solicitor. Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Utah and Washington have signed similar agreements. More information is available on the U.S. Department of Labor’s misclassification Web page at http://www.dol.gov/misclassification. MOUs are being actively pursued with additional states.

According to the DOL, misclassifying employees as independent contractors results in employees being denied access to benefits and protections such as family and medical leave, overtime compensation, minimum wage pay and unemployment insurance. The DOL further asserts that misclassification can create economic pressure for law-abiding business owners, who often find it difficult to compete with those who are skirting the law.

While most home health agencies employ their caregiving staff or contract entities that employ the staff assigned to the home health agency, there are situations when home care providers treat workers as independent contractors. This approach has been known to exist within home health agencies, particularly with individual therapists.

At the same time, other home care programs that are not home health agencies may classify workers as independent contractors. These include state-run consumer-directed care programs, staffing registries, and individuals themselves. Most often these home care operations involve personal care services.

Whether an individual can be classified as an independent contractor or must be classified as an employee is not a simple determination in home care. Likewise, with the widely varying models of home care delivery, it is not possible to easily conclude that a particular work category is an employee or can be an independent contractor.

Home care employers compliant with DOL standards for worker classification are at a competitive disadvantage with entities that improperly classify individuals as contractors.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The DOL should issue comprehensive standards specific to home care that allow for consistent application of worker classifications. The DOL should recognize the variations in home care programs when proceeding with its education, oversight and auditing efforts.

RATIONALE: Employers that misclassify their employees may not be paying the proper overtime compensation, FICA and unemployment insurance taxes, or workers’ compensation premiums. According to the DOL, misclassifying employees as independent contractors results in employees being
denied access to benefits and protections such as family and medical leave, overtime compensation, minimum wage pay and unemployment insurance. The DOL further asserts that misclassification can create economic pressure for law-abiding business owners, who often find it difficult to compete with those who are skirting the law. Hence, misclassification of workers as independent contractors harms the worker and the employers that comply with classification standards. At the same time, DOL needs to be careful to avoid an overbroad approach to home care worker classification to recognize that certain skilled, professional caregivers can correctly operate as independent contractors.
ENSURE ACCEPTABLE STANDARDS FOR CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY APPROPRIATE HEALTH SERVICES

ISSUE: The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Office of Minority Heath has prepared draft standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Health Services. These standards require providers to have a comprehensive management strategy to address culturally and linguistically appropriate services including goals, plans, policies, procedures, and designated staff. Providers must establish a formal mechanism for community and consumer involvement in the design and execution of service delivery, planning, policy making, operations, evaluation, training and treatment planning. In addition, providers must recruit qualified, diverse and culturally competent staff trained to address the needs of the racial and ethnic community they serve and provide all clients with limited English proficiency access to bilingual staff or interpretation services. Use of family members and friends is not an acceptable solution to the need for interpreters.

RECOMMENDATION:

1. Abandon the draft cultural and linguistic standards in favor of already existing global standards and requirements as found in the Medicare Conditions of Participation, national accrediting body standards, and professional practice standards.
2. Develop and make available to providers translated materials to inform Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries of their rights in all languages (e.g. patient rights, advance directives, notice of non-coverage, OASIS data set).
3. Allow the use of family members and friends to interpret.
4. Require CMS to produce beneficiary notices, OASIS privacy notices, and other required, federally developed forms in multiple languages.

RATIONALE: Most home health agencies are small businesses and lack the financial resources needed to comply with the proposed standards. The cost of hiring bilingual staff or interpreters is compounded for home care providers because services are delivered in the patient’s home. To exclude family and friends from the role of interpreter is counter to the philosophy of home care. Global standards requiring providers of health care services to effectively communicate and recognize cultural issues of their patients already exist.
REVISE THE POLICY GUIDANCE FOR PROVIDERS SERVING PERSONS WITH LIMITED ENGLISH SKILLS

ISSUE: The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office of Civil Rights issued policy guidance to providers of health and social services discussing methods by which entities that receive federal financial assistance from HHS can meet their obligation to provide oral interpretation to limited English proficiency persons (LEP). The guidance also outlines obligations to provide translation of written materials. Providers must establish policies and procedures for identifying and assessing the language needs of their client populations, include oral assistance options in their plans, provide notices to those with limited English proficiency of their right to free language assistance, and provide staff training and program monitoring. When providers have a significant percentage of their population with information needs in a language other than English, a provider is required to offer written materials in that language. Also, providers are required to determine the proficiency of interpreters that they use and ensure that the interpreter is familiar with medical terminology.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. Estimate provider’s cost to implement the published guidelines.
2. Establish guidelines based on provider size.
3. Translate commonly used documents into languages where there are 100 or more persons residing in the country and make these translated documents available to providers.
4. Allow providers to use family members and friends as interpreters.
5. Develop resources for providers including telephone translation services, computer driven voice and written translator programs.
6. Develop and disseminate training programs and materials for training of medical personnel.
7. Eliminate the requirement for translators to have training in medical terminology.

RATIONALE: The LEP guidelines place new financial hardships on already overburdened home health and hospice providers. They create new administrative and paperwork burdens and costs for interpreters. Home health agencies do not have the financial and staffing resources to meet the recommended guideline to make available bilingual, medically oriented interpreters; limitation of use of friends and family members as interpreters creates a barrier to patient care. Finally, national standards against which to measure linguistic proficiency in medical terminology are not available. Training in medical terminology is not important for translators, as information should be provided to interpreters by health care personnel in lay language that would be easily understood by patients if given directly.
OPPOSE PUBLIC AUTHORITIES OR OTHER MEASURES THAT RESTRICT CONSUMER
CHOICE OF PROVIDER IN THE PROVISION OF LONG TERM CARE SERVICES AND FAIL
TO PROTECT WORKERS

ISSUE: California and other states have implemented a state-sponsored public authority system that requires that home care aides providing services under the Medicaid program be employed by the public authority. This arrangement was sought by employee unions to facilitate the organization of home care aides. Consumers in these states are required to obtain home care aide services from the public authority.

Similarly, legislation was introduced in New Jersey to establish such a system for that state, but was rejected. Washington State has established a public authority that permits home care agencies to compete with the public authority, but discourages agency participation in the provision of Medicaid home care services by paying more for services provided by the public authority. There is a growing effort by unions to expand the public authority model of delivering home care aide services and to mandate its adoption in any new federal long-term care program.

The public authority model of care delivery often is promoted as a means to give consumers greater control in caregiver selection and supervision. However, this model does not fit for all the disabled or elderly in need of home care, as it is a model that can deter individuals from seeking care, limit options for continuity of care, and weaken quality of care standards. By providing consumers with a public authority model, choice is limited to the public authority as the provider. The public authority model raises additional concerns related to accountability and quality of services. Some of these programs operate without appropriate standards for client eligibility, service verification, and the employee’s entitlement to wages earned. They fail to provide workers with basic protections related to workers compensation, collective bargaining choices, and other rights afforded most other workers. Finally, the programs operate without quality of service standards that are comparable to an agency model of care delivery.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), P.L. 111-148, contains numerous improvements in federal Medicaid support for home and community-based care. Fortunately, Congress resisted calls for the expanded use of a public authority model in the expansion of Medicaid home care, and the states have the full authority to devise any suitable delivery model that secures accessible, high quality home care.

RECOMMENDATION: All federal agencies, including the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), should reject proposals that restrict or discourage home care aides from working for home care agencies or consumers from obtaining home care aide services through agencies, and should require the use of a public authority model of care delivery. In any new or existing long-term care program, the federal government should ensure that consumers have the right to choose to receive home care aide services according to the delivery model that they are most comfortable with. In addition, home care aides should have the opportunity to choose their employer instead of being relegated to a “one-employer” model that can restrict their employment rights.

RATIONALE: Workers are not well served by mandating participation in a public authority, which is at heart a monopoly composed of a union combined with an employer with the authority of government. There is no compelling evidence that imposing a public authority is the best way to achieve increased wages and benefits for employees; there are other means for attaining this goal.

Under the public authority system, home care aides are stripped of their right to choose their employer and the protection of working under professional supervision. Home care agencies are better equipped than public authorities to provide worker training and oversight of the home care aide. Many agencies
also provide career ladders. Home care agencies assume liability for services and can be held accountable, unlike large government-sponsored monopolies.

The quality of care and service accountability concerns have been exposed in the California model, where patients have lost care, workers have received wages for care undelivered, and payments are made on behalf of ineligible clients.

The public authority model either eliminates or makes it difficult for patients to choose to receive home care aide services from an agency, limiting free enterprise and in some cases causing agencies to close their doors. It stifles private sector competition that can lead to improvements in quality and price. A California district attorney recently said their program is so “riddled with fraud it’s approaching state-subsidized elder and dependent-adult abuse.” A California state analysis for 2003-04 said the council system is so out of control that the state proposed pulling state funding out of the public authority home care system.

Given the myriad problems that have arisen where the public authority model has been tried, it would be particularly inappropriate for the federal government to impose this model on any federal long-term care program. A federal mandate imposing this model on state programs such as Medicaid would run counter to ongoing efforts by the federal government to give the states greater flexibility in how they run their programs.
VII. HOSPICE
ESTABLISH TIME FRAMES FOR RESPONSE/APPROVAL OF HOSPICE LOCATION CHANGE

BACKGROUND: Certification requirements dictate that, in cases where a hospice plans to move from its surveyed, certified location to a new site or open a new location, a hospice must receive approval for the change from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) before it is permitted to provide Medicare services from the new address. As part of the process, the hospice must:

1. Submit all required documentation and an amended Form CMS-855A to its Medicare Administrative Contractor (MAC).
2. Notify CMS and its state survey agency in writing of the planned change.
3. If under deemed status, notify its national accrediting organization (AO) in writing.
4. Receive formal approval of the change in writing.

The CMS Regional Office (RO) may grant or deny the address change without a survey, or may determine that a survey is needed to establish that the new address complies with all applicable requirements. The opening of a new office (a “multiple location”) requires that the new location be surveyed. CMS is expected to advise the provider of its findings. However, CMS has not specified time frames within which a hospice can count on receipt of a definitive determination on its request for approval of change.

Under separate provider enrollment requirements, a hospice is required to notify CMS of address or other changes through submission of the 855 enrollment form within 90 days of the change.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should establish and enforce reasonable time frames within which state survey agencies, ROs, and MACs must respond to requests for approval of an address change or establishment of a new multiple location. CMS should also consider automatic approval for address changes in cases where a hospice is moving within the same geographical area and has a positive track record relative to its surveys. In cases where surveys are required to facilitate approval of the address change, CMS should establish a clear-cut process that includes access to expedited surveys and is minimally disruptive to the delivery of patient care.

RATIONALE: Different divisions of CMS require varying notifications and approvals of hospice office changes; these requirements are at times inconsistent, creating confusion for providers. CMS failed to consider business practices and the operational and financial burden this policy could impose on providers. Establishment and enforcement of explicit time frames for response by CMS and its agents would help hospice organizations better meet their responsibilities for notice and approval of office changes. Where approval of such changes reasonably requires a survey, CMS should develop an expedited process that ensures delivery of high-quality care that simultaneously supports continuity of care.
ENSURE MEDICAID HOSPICE BENEFIT REFLECTS SAME AMOUNT, DURATION, AND SCOPE OF SERVICES AS MEDICARE

ISSUE: While states are not required to offer hospice services to adult Medicaid beneficiaries, most states (48) currently have hospice included under their State Medicaid Plan. While states have some flexibility related to the structure of the hospice benefit periods provided under Medicaid, Section 1902(a)(10)(VI) of the Social Security Act requires that Medicaid hospice services must be provided in the same amount, duration and scope as those offered under Medicare. However, as states grapple with increasing budget deficits, some are considering elimination of hospice benefits for adult Medicaid beneficiaries, while others have talked of limiting the hospice benefit to a “lifetime” limit of 210 days, despite numerous studies indicating that hospice services, when used appropriately, result in savings rather than increased health care costs.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) should ensure that states comply with the requirement that Medicaid hospice services be provided in the same amount, duration and scope as those offered under Medicare.

RATIONALE: Hospice holds great potential to enhance the lives of individuals with terminal illness and assist loved ones in dealing with the death of a family member or friend; use of hospice services frequently results in health care savings. NAHC believes that this valuable care model should be accessible to all Medicaid enrollees. Efforts to address concerns in hospice care should be directed at ensuring patients receiving services meet eligibility criteria rather than denying access to care.
WORK WITH HOSPICE INDUSTRY ON HOSPICE PAYMENT REFORM; REJECT REBASING AND SITE-OF-SERVICE ADJUSTMENT FOR NF RESIDENTS

ISSUE: The Medicare hospice benefit (MHB) was created in 1982 to care for terminally ill cancer patients. Currently, hospice patients with a cancer diagnosis represent only about 30 percent of those being served by hospices, according to the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC). The median length of stay is 18 days, and has averaged in that vicinity for a number of years. The average length of stay in 2012 was 88 days. In 2011 45.2 percent of Medicare decedents received hospice services, which equates to approximately 1.2 million Medicare beneficiaries.

Although costs for pharmaceutical and pharmacotherapy for symptom control and pain management have increased dramatically, as have nearly all items required to deliver hospice care, the reimbursement system has not changed since the benefit’s inception. The current reimbursement structure was created by estimating the original cost of delivering routine home care (96 percent of the care given) by analyzing data collected during the 1980-1982 Medicare Hospice Benefit Demonstration Project. In 1983, 20 percent of patients received hospice services for seven days; this has increased to about 30 percent.

MedPAC issued recommendations to the Congress for revising the hospice reimbursement system in its March 2009 Report to the Congress and continues to recommend such changes, which include expansion of data collection and the creation of a new payment model that reflects the variation in costs over the patient’s length of hospice care.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-148) requires that the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) revise the hospice payment system and implement these payment changes no earlier than October 1, 2013. CMS is in the process of gathering hospice data to assist in development of revisions to the MHB payment system, but significant data gaps remain.

In April 2013 CMS provided a glimpse of some options that it has under consideration for payment reform but a final payment reform proposal has not been made public. Of particular concern is CMS’ indication that, in addition to considering a tiered approach that would supply higher payment at the beginning of hospice care and just prior to a beneficiary’s death, it is also considering action to “rebase” routine home care rates (RHC) (which would reduce them by approximately 10 percent) and cut payments for hospice care provided to nursing facility residents.

RECOMMENDATION: CMS should include NAHC and the hospice industry in determination of advisable reform for the hospice payment system. CMS should resist efforts to overstep its charge to refine the hospice payment system by including changes like rebasing of RHC or reduced payments for care provided to NF residents that could that go far beyond the payment refinement sought by the health reform bill and threaten future access to the full hospice benefit as it was conceived.

RATIONALE: To effectively revise the hospice payment system, CMS must have an accurate and rich data set that reflects the full scope of services currently provided by hospices. To address these gaps, CMS has initiated changes in the hospice cost report for freestanding hospices and, in 2014, will require additional data on hospice claims it believes can be used in hospice payment revision decisions. However, concerns remain that these expanded data collections may not provide a full and accurate depiction of true hospice costs, which could lead to inaccurate payment revision decisions.

Introduction of a tiered payment approach to better synchronize the payment system with actual costs is appropriate. These could dramatically change incentives in the hospice payment system and, as a result, patterns of enrollment and care, and may be all that is needed to address inappropriate incentives in the current system. CMS must address payment reform in a measured and deliberate manner. Changes such as rebasing and a site-of-service adjustment for NF patients may go well beyond what is needed, and create so much upheaval in the hospice payment system that they threaten the integrity of
the hospice benefit and jeopardize access to care.
PROVIDE FULL DISCLOSURE AND ENSURE SNF/NF MEDICARE BENEFICIARY RESIDENTS’ RIGHT TO CHOOSE HOSPICE PROVIDER

ISSUE: In 1989, Public Law 101-239 mandated the ability of terminally ill Medicare beneficiaries residing in skilled nursing facilities/nursing facilities (SNF/NFs) to access services under the Medicare hospice benefit (MHB). As SNF/NF residents become aware of the MHB, more of them are seeking hospice services. However, the SNF/NF is not required to offer hospice services, nor is it required to disclose at admission if residents will be able to access hospice services without the need to transfer to another facility. Further, if the facility does have an arrangement to provide hospice, it is not required to disclose the hospice program with which it has a contract to provide services to residents. Finally, a resident does not have the right to choose the hospice program that he/she will receive hospice services from in the facility. In 2012, CMS released revised SNF/NF Medicare conditions of participation interpretive guidelines related to end-of-life care; however, these are interpretive guidelines rather than requirements and they do not specifically address notifying SNF/NF residents upon admission whether or not hospice services are available at the facility. CMS guides SNF/NFs that they should tell the resident which hospices, if any, can provide care in the facility, but the guidance does not specify that this should occur at the time of admission and, again, at the time the resident is determined to be at the end of life.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Congress should require that SNF/NFs disclose upon admission, and at the time residents are determined to be nearing the end of life, whether or not hospice services are available at the facility, and the name(s) of the hospice(s) with which the facility has contracted to provide hospice services on site. Additionally, Congress should mandate that eligible Medicare beneficiaries residing in SNF/NFs have the right to receive hospice services from the Medicare-certified hospice of their choice.

RATIONALE: SNF/NFs should provide full disclosure regarding the availability of hospice services through the facility at admission so that potential residents are fully aware of whether or not they will be able to access hospice services at some time during their stay if needed. Such disclosure could help to avoid the significant upheaval and trauma that could result from a resident’s transfer to a different facility in order to exercise his/her right to the hospice benefit. Potential residents should also be notified regarding the names of the program(s) through which hospice services would be provided if they elect the hospice benefit while in residence at the facility. Finally, Medicare beneficiaries eligible for the hospice benefit should have the right to choose which hospice will serve them. Currently, a terminally ill SNF/NF resident may only access the Medicare hospice benefit if the SNF/NF has a formal arrangement with a hospice program to provide services in the facility.
ENSURE ACCESS TO DRUGS NECESSARY FOR PAIN CONTROL

ISSUE: Inadequate pain management has been identified by experts in the field as a national public health issue. Terminally ill patients may require very high doses of pain medication to achieve effective pain control. Physicians and other health professionals often do not have adequate knowledge about pain control, and/or have fears of laws related to controlled substances. Exacerbating the problem is the Drug Enforcement Agency’s (DEA) reaction to Oregon’s assisted-suicide law. The FDA has warned that physicians who prescribe lethal doses of narcotics under Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act would be in violation of federal drug laws. The Institute of Medicine (IoM) has convened a committee at the request of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to address the current state of the science with respect to pain research, care, and education and to explore approaches to advance the field.

RECOMMENDATIONS: HHS should closely monitor the work of the IoM related to pain research, treatment and education, and make every effort to implement IoM’s findings relative to pain. HHS should also work with the Food and Drug Administration to:

1. Develop guidelines and educational material that promote effective use of drugs to control pain.
2. Avoid DEA actions that would discourage or prohibit physicians from prescribing adequate and appropriate controlled substances for the management of pain related to terminal illnesses.

RATIONALE: Pain and symptom management is the cornerstone of good hospice care, which rests on the belief that terminally ill patients should not have to suffer because of inadequate pain management and lack of access to appropriate medications. Creating laws and policies that impose arbitrary limitations on physicians who prescribe controlled substances could very well have the unintended consequences of discouraging or limiting them from adequately treating terminally ill patients.
IMPROVE APPLICATION OF WAGE INDEX FOR
MEDICARE HOME HEALTH AND HOSPICE

ISSUE: Since the inception of the Medicare per-visit cost limits, home health payment rates have been adjusted to reflect varying wage levels across the nation through the application of a wage index. This payment rate adjustment continues under the Medicare home health prospective payment system (PPS), which was implemented effective October 1, 2000. However, the wage index that has been utilized by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has been based upon varying wages within hospitals across the nation. The hospice benefit payment also is adjusted by the same hospital wage index with a further adjustment known as the Budget Neutrality Factor (the BNAF is being phased out over seven years – fiscal years 2010 through 2015). The hospital index is derived from data that explicitly excludes any home health services costs. Furthermore, it is based on the mix of employees found in hospitals, rather than home health agencies and hospices. In addition, providers have seen wide swings in their wage index from one year to the next. An attempt some years back to create and utilize a home care-specific wage index failed due to the unavailability of reliable wage data.

While the home health and hospice payment rates are based upon the application of a hospital wage index, the index utilized and its manner of application are significantly distinct from that utilized relative to hospital services payment rates. Hospitals may secure a geographic reclassification for application of the wage index by establishing that the particular hospital draws on an employment pool different from the geographical area to which it would otherwise be assigned for its wage index level. Home health agencies and hospices are not authorized to secure a wage index reclassification. As a result, a hospital may compete for the same health care employees as a hospice or home health agency, but be approved for a relatively higher payment rate through the wage index reclassification. Congress has established specific wage index criteria for certain geographic locations. However, these criteria apply only to hospitals that are also protected from wide variations from one year to the next by establishment of a floor.

The Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) recommended that Medicare replace the hospital wage index with one that relies on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and design the new wage index in a manner that allows for tailoring to other provider sectors including home health and hospice.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) directs CMS to reform the hospital wage index consistent with the recommendations of MedPAC and to report to Congress on its plan for instituting a new wage index. CMS submitted its report on a commuting-based wage index (CBWI) to Congress in April, 2012; however, the report indicates that the complexities of applying the proposed wage index to providers whose payment varies based on the location where services are delivered would be prohibitive.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should conduct further studies to determine a wage index approach that can be most equitably applied to all Medicare providers. The goal should be to put all providers on a level playing field with their respective wage indexes. If the revised wage index allows for geographic reclassifications for one provider group, it should provide the same allowance for all. Any wage index weight changes in a reformed model or in future years in applying the wage index model should be subject to a transition limitation on increases and decreases from one year to the next.

RATIONALE: The current hospital wage index does not fairly reflect variations in wages in home health and hospice. In today’s health care environment, health care providers of all types compete for employment of the same personnel. The adjustment of Medicare payment rates intended to reflect variations in wages across the nation should be consistent across all provider types. With increasing shortages of health care personnel, unequal wage index adjustments for health care providers in the same
geographic region results in an uneven and discriminatory distribution of the employment pool of personnel. Prevention of wide swings in wage indexes will enable health care providers to more precisely project revenue and budget expenses.
REVISE REQUIREMENTS FOR HOSPICE FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTERS

ISSUE: Section 3132(b) of the Affordable Care Act of 2010 requires a hospice physician or nurse practitioner (NP) to have a face-to-face encounter with every hospice patient prior to the patient’s 180th-day recertification, and each subsequent recertification.

In the Home Health Prospective Payment System Rate Update for Calendar Year (CY) 2011, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) finalized its implementation approach for this hospice provision. The final rule, codified at 42 C.F.R. 418.22(a)(4) (75 Fed. Reg. 70463, November 17, 2010) states that the encounter must occur no more than 30 calendar days prior to the start of the hospice patient’s third benefit period. The regulation requires that the hospice physician or nurse practitioner attest that the encounter occurred, and the recertifying physician must include a narrative that describes how the clinical findings of the encounter support the patient’s terminal prognosis of six months or less. Both the narrative and the attestation must be part of, or an addendum to, the recertification. In 2011, CMS allowed hospices to delay the face-to-face encounter up to two days after a patient’s hospice election under certain documented exceptional circumstances.

A number of concerns have arisen relative to the hospice face-to-face requirement:

- Hospices must complete the face-to-face encounter prior to the beginning of the applicable benefit period and must be arranged by the hospice. As the result, a patient’s care may be delayed while the hospice identifies a physician or NP available and schedules the encounter. For many hospices, those in rural areas in particular, this delay can be much longer than two days. This is because these areas do not have access to physicians and NPs that meet the employment/contract requirements of CMS. However, these hospices may have access to physician’s assistants and other non-physician practitioners.

- The face-to-face requirement is applicable to a patient’s full time on hospice regardless of when the previous hospice service was provided. A patient may have been off hospice service for a lengthy period of time, then begin rapid deterioration and need admission very quickly. In such cases, the face-to-face requirement may not only delay admission but forces the patient to unnecessarily be subjected to an assessment.

- Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) data systems are not all available 24 hours, seven days a week, to access patient information; most do not have full information related to a patient’s history on hospice care to establish with absolute certainty whether a face-to-face encounter is required. CMS has clarified that if the data systems are not available, and because of this the hospice is not aware that the patient is entering his/her third or subsequent benefit period, the hospice has two days in which to obtain this information and complete the face-to-face. This two-day time period is insufficient time for the hospice to get the face-to-face schedule as the two days, in essence, could be only one working day. For instance, those patients admitted on a Friday or holiday when the CMS data systems are not available don’t have access to the CMS data systems until the next business day, which could be Monday, or in the case of some holidays, Tuesday. The hospice accesses the data system the morning of the next CMS business day, sees that the patient is in his/her third or subsequent benefit period, and then has to get a hospice physician or NP to conduct the face-to-face. Getting the face-to-face scheduled can, as mentioned above, take several days, especially in rural areas.

- Hospices will not be reimbursed for costs related to the face-to-face requirements, which may be prohibitive – particularly for small hospices in rural areas.

- Hospices may not utilize telehealth services to meet the face-to-face requirement.

- If a patient is on continuing hospice care but the hospice is not able, due to staffing limitations or other complications, to conduct the face-to-face prior to the benefit period for which the
encounter is required, the hospice will not be paid for services provided until the face-to-face has been completed.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should work with the hospice industry to ensure that regulations and guidance governing the hospice face-to-face provide sufficient flexibility that hospice programs are able to comply with the requirements without any threat of delayed access to care for beneficiaries in need of hospice services, and without undue financial burden on the hospice.

RATIONALE: The intent of the face-to-face requirement is to ensure adequate and appropriate involvement and accountability of physicians relative to certification of eligibility for hospice care. However, as currently written and interpreted by CMS, it may delay access to care and serve as a deterrent for some hospices to take eligible patients in need of immediate care onto service. This was neither its intent nor an advisable result of the requirement.
ABOLISH PAYMENT DELAYS CAUSED BY BILLING POLICIES FOR HOSPICE

ISSUE: The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) implemented the longstanding hospital sequential billing policy on hospice claims. The policy prohibits providers from submitting claims for care to beneficiaries where previously submitted claims are pending. Claims processing can be delayed for weeks or months for many reasons, including medical review activities, common working file problems, CMS or Medicare Administrative Contractor (MAC) claims processing problems and pending claims from other providers, etc. Hospices have continued to serve patients even though Medicare payments have been delayed. CMS requires that hospices only submit one bill per beneficiary per month. There is high probability that with additional data required on hospice claims beginning April 1, 2014 hospices will hit the 450-line claim limit. This will cause the hospice to have to submit another bill the following month and with only one claim allowed per beneficiary per month, this delays the following months’ claims placing a hardship on hospices to be able to continue providing care.

RECOMMENDATION: Require hospices to submit claims in chronological order but process and pay all clean claims as submitted, regardless of whether previous claims have been processed and allow more than one claim per beneficiary per month when the reason for the multiple claims is due to the hospice exceeding the 450-line claim limit. Pay interest on claims that are not processed timely.

RATIONALE: Most hospice programs are small businesses with little financial reserve, dependent on uninterrupted payment for services delivered. The type of patient for whom the number of lines on the claim is expected to be high is those patients receiving a significant number of medications with frequent doses and frequent visits by hospice team members. This is typically the hospice patient requiring higher levels of care such as the general inpatient level of care or continuous care. These are usually the more expensive levels of care for hospices to provide. Interruption of payment and slow down of payment for weeks or months, while requiring agencies to continue services to patients, can result in severe financial hardships.
ENCOURAGE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR HOSPICE UTILIZATION

ISSUE: Without outcomes linked to hospice utilization data, it is impossible to determine the appropriate utilization in terms of length of stay and level of care. It should be recognized that there is probably some under- and over-utilization of services. Currently, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has begun collecting hospice visits and charge data as a first step in creating a database on hospice services provided. Due to the rapid growth in hospice expenditures, the hospice medical director and the attending physician’s authorization for hospice services are being questioned by Medicare’s contractors, and payments are being withheld based on Medicare’s contractors’ determinations of prognosis.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
- CMS should work with NAHC and the hospice industry to analyze the utilization data and identify problem areas.
- For identified problem areas, develop uniform protocols of care based on outcomes against which utilization can be measured. These should not be used as the basis for automatic denials, but to indicate the need for justifying hospice services.
- Direct equal attention toward under-utilization as well as over-utilization.
- Require Medicare’s contractors to offer training at least twice a year, open to all providers who wish to attend.

RATIONALE: Variation in utilization points not to abuse as much as it does to physician concerns about giving a prognosis of six months or less for terminally ill patients and the differences in health care practices. Development of uniform protocols and the education of providers are the keys to compliance with eligibility criteria and the control of inappropriate utilization.
ENSURE TIMELY UPDATE OF LOCAL COVERAGE DECISIONS AND CONSISTENT DEFINITIONS AND APPLICATION OF DIAGNOSIS CODES ON CLAIMS

ISSUE: The current hospice local coverage decisions (LCD) promulgated by CMS (Guidelines) limit the policies to a set of medical variables and clinical signs and symptoms that are used to predict a prognosis of six months or less for terminally ill Medicare beneficiaries. Not all claims reviewers using the LCDs are given instructions or guidance to take into account the physician’s clinical judgment or the psychosocial dimensions of the illness for determination of coverage decisions.

The multiple Medicare Administrative Contractors (MACs) for hospices do not have consistent requirements and guidance on hospice eligibility and how the diagnosis(es) are to be identified on the hospice claim. Specifically, the terms “comorbid,” “coexisting,” “secondary,” and “related/unrelated” are not defined, so hospices are unable to consistently apply them. There is some lack of clarity as to what coding guidelines CMS believes should be applicable to hospice and which should not, and the degree, generally, to which outpatient coding guidelines sufficiently take hospice care into consideration. This increases the likelihood that data received by CMS and upon which payment decisions are made is inaccurate.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should perform annual reviews of all LCDs and revise the policies based on available research and other pertinent findings relevant to the determination of a prognosis of six months or less. Additionally, CMS should ensure that the ICD-9-CM codes are current. Additional steps that should be taken relative to LCDs include the following:

- Add the following criteria to LCDs to provide additional guidance to medical reviewers in determining the appropriateness of hospice admissions or re-certifications:
  - Encourage the use of multiple LCDs to document co-morbidities so that all conditions, and not just the primary diagnosis, are being reviewed.
  - Require review of documentation of the clinical judgment and psychosocial dimensions of the terminal illness by medical reviewers.
  - Require documentation by the reviewer of the date of patient’s death, as appropriate, while enrolled in the hospice benefit or after discharge.
- CMS should conduct research to validate the accuracy of the LCDs, including an analysis of their specificity and sensitivity.
- Publish future hospice medical review policies in the Federal Register for public review and comment, or allow broad dissemination of proposed policies through national and state associations representing the hospice industry, so that comments can be compiled and recommendations returned to CMS.
- Require that when making Medicare claims determinations, greater weight be given to the opinion of the treating physician.
- Require review or additional documentation prior to issuing denials.

CMS requires that diagnoses related to the terminal diagnosis be included on hospice claims. In order to obtain accurate and consistent data, CMS should determine what coding guidelines are applicable to hospice and clearly define the terms associated with those guidelines (i.e. comorbid or related/unrelated).

RATIONALE: CMS annual reviews of the policies are needed in order to keep them informed and up-to-date. Criteria for determining a prognosis of six months or less (eligibility for hospice services) is not a matter to be decided at the local level, but rather by a set of scientifically determined variables, signs, and symptoms for discrete diagnoses based on research and clinical judgment. With the broad dissemination of proposed policies, either in the Federal Register or through national or state associations, the resulting
LCDs will better reflect the current state of the art of prognostication and best practices in determining a life expectancy of six months or less for Medicare beneficiaries.
BASE SURVEY FREQUENCY ON PERFORMANCE OF MEDICARE HOSPICE
BENEFIT PROVIDERS

ISSUE: Approximately 16.5% of Medicare-certified hospices are surveyed each year. There is no legislative requirement for the frequency of surveys for providers of the Medicare hospice benefit (MHB). CMS’ failure to require that hospice providers be surveyed on a regular basis can result in lack of compliance with regulations and poor quality of care. CMS currently has hospice providers on a seven-year cycle for surveys, but that sometimes extends to 10 years in some parts of the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Limited resources available for hospice surveys should be used to target quality issues by adopting the following survey frequency guidelines:

- New Medicare hospice agencies should be surveyed annually for at least the first two years of certification.
- Agencies with condition-level deficiencies should be surveyed at least annually until they are deficiency free.
- Complaint surveys should be conducted following significant complaints. If deficiencies are found, annual surveys should be conducted until the hospice is deficiency free.
- All hospices should be surveyed, at a minimum, every three years.

RATIONALE: When the Medicare Hospice Benefit (MHB) was created by the Congress, in order to assure quality of care and implement the benefit, CMS was given the responsibility of creating regulations to be followed by providers of hospice services. As the next step of this responsibility, there need to be regular surveys to ensure compliance with these regulations. Recipients of the MHB should be afforded the same protections provided to recipients of other Medicare benefits.
COMPENSATE PHYSICIANS FOR HOSPICE CERTIFICATION AND ADVANCE CARE PLANNING CONSULTATIONS

ISSUE: One of the primary requirements for Medicare beneficiaries to access the Medicare hospice benefit is certification by the patient’s attending physician and the hospice medical director that the patient has a limited life expectancy of six months or less if the disease runs its normal course. The length of stay for many beneficiaries on the Medicare hospice benefit is still too short. At the request of Congress, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted a study on the MHB that was released in 2000. Another report was issued in December, 2007: “End-of-Life Care: Key Components Provided by Programs in Four States.” The reports concluded that the most significant influence on patient use of hospice is the physician. “Physicians initiate most referrals to hospice, and they may continue to care for their patients after enrollment as part of the hospice team. Because patients and their families rely heavily on physician recommendations for treatment, including recommendations for end-of-life care, physicians are an influential factor in a patient’s entry into hospice.” The most recent Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) data shows that the median length of stay remains is about 18 days.

The original health reform legislation approved by the House of Representatives (H.R. 3962) provided for payment to physicians and other health care professionals to provide a voluntary advance care planning consultation (Section 1233); it also contained a provision regarding the dissemination of advance care planning information (Section 240).

NAHC applauds CMS’ creation of HCPCS codes GO179 and GO180 for physician certification and recertification of Medicare-covered home health services. The new codes will help home health agencies get physicians more involved in home health care. A similar code needs to be developed for hospice care.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should create a new HCPCS code to compensate physicians for patient certification of eligibility for the Medicare hospice benefit. CMS should also authorize volunteer advance care planning consultations under Medicare to educate beneficiaries on issues related to end-of-life care and end-of-life care planning.

RATIONALE: In the past, CMS has expressed concern about the decreasing length of stay on the Medicare hospice benefit, and asked how they can help alleviate the problem. It is imperative to get physicians to focus on end-of-life care much earlier than is now occurring. Although the Medical Director of a Medicare-certified hospice is covered under Part A as an employee of the hospice, the patient’s attending physician continues to bill under Part B for care plan oversight and direct patient services. At a time when the length of stay on the MHB is still too short for many hospice patients, it is important to encourage physicians to refer patients sooner by encouraging their efforts to educate patients on the availability of hospice care, and compensating them for hospice certification. Increasing the hospice length of stay for short-stay patients would allow the patient and their families to get the full benefit of holistic hospice services and save Medicare dollars by keeping patients at home rather than in traditional aggressive institutional care.
SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT OF A ROBUST HOSPICE QUALITY REPORTING PROGRAM

ISSUE: The June, 2008, hospice conditions of participation require hospices to develop, implement, maintain, and evaluate an effective, data-driven quality assessment and performance improvement program. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) requires hospices to either develop their own or use currently available systems of measures to track patient outcomes as well as optimum functioning at every level of a hospice’s operations. The requirement includes retaining the information in a database that permits analysis over time.

The final 2010 health care reform legislation provides a strong start toward the development and implementation of a quality reporting program, by (a) mandating that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) publish hospice quality measures covering all dimensions of hospice quality and care efficiency by October 1, 2012, and (b) requiring that hospices begin reporting these measures. Failure to submit quality measures by a hospice would result in a two-point reduction in the annual market basket index update beginning with FY 2014 (Section 3004).

CMS initiated a voluntary quality measure collection and reporting program in late 2011 and early 2012; mandatory quality measure data collection began October through December 2012, with mandatory data reporting in January and April of 2013. Failure to report data in early 2013 resulted in a 2 percent payment reduction for FY2014. Starting January 2013 hospices were required to collect and report the first full year of data, which must be reported by April 1, 2014, or hospices will have their FY2015 payments reduced by 2 percentage points. Beginning in July 2014, the HQRP enters a new phase with the requirement that hospices collect and submit data for a patient-specific Hospice Item Set (HIS). Subsequently, beginning in Jan. 2015, hospices must contract with an outside vendor to collect responses to a hospice experience of care survey that will be completed by hospice patient family members. NAHC applauds CMS for the work done thus far in this important area and encourages further collaboration with NAHC and the hospice industry to ease the transition to public reporting.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should advance the HQRP through work with the hospice industry to select appropriate measures for reporting and establish a reasonable time frame for incorporating new measures. CMS should ensure that the quality measures currently under development for hospice incorporate:

- Reliable and valid indicators.
- Outcome measures limited to those that most accurately predict quality.
- A method for risk adjustment.
- A standard assessment.
- A simple system with clinical utility.
- A mechanism enabling CMS to validate agency data.
- An ongoing evaluation of the entire system.

RATIONALE: The ideal hospice quality assessment program must be based on what happens to the patients; however, there are currently no standard outcome measures for hospice care. In
addition, research and demonstration projects are not factored into the current per diem reimbursement structure. The proposed quality system will require massive data collection and reporting unless purposely controlled. Every effort must be made to keep data collection and the paperwork burdens to a minimum so resources can be used for patient care rather than paperwork.
REINSTATE PRESUMPTIVE STATUS FOR HOSPICE WAIVER OF LIABILITY

ISSUE: Section 1879 of the Social Security Act provides protection from liability for charges for certain denied claims to beneficiaries who, acting in good faith, receive inpatient or outpatient services from Medicare providers. Similarly, providers may also be protected from liability under Section 1879 of the Act when it is determined that they did not know and could not reasonably have been expected to know that Medicare would deny payment. The waiver of liability is applicable to hospice claims denied on the basis of the “not reasonable and necessary” and “custodial care” exclusions. The presumptive status of the waiver of liability, which expired at the end of 1995, protected hospices by allowing an agency to be compensated under the waiver presumption, when their overall denial of claims rate was less than 2.5% of Medicare services provided. Any agency that exceeded this 2.5% denial rate was not reimbursed under waiver. This requirement forced agencies to use due diligence in determining eligibility and coverage, but also protected them from financial loss for care that was provided in good faith.

Subsequent to the expiration of the presumptive status of waiver, Section 1879(g) of the Social Security Act was amended by Section 4447 of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 to extend limitation on liability protection to a beneficiary enrolled in a hospice when there is a denial of claims due to a determination that the individual is not terminally ill. This took effect for services furnished on or after August 5, 1997. The MAC is to apply the usual procedures (not presumptive status) of the limitation on liability provision contained in the Medicare manual, and the indemnification procedures to determine whether or not the beneficiary is protected from liability and whether the hospice is protected from liability under Section 1879(g)(2) of the Act.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) should reinstate waiver presumption for providers of the Medicare hospice benefit.

RATIONALE: The waiver presumption acts to protect providers who render services to Medicare beneficiaries in good faith, believing that they will be covered. The cushion for error is crucial in the Medicare hospice benefit due to the physician’s inherent difficulty in determining that a patient will likely die within six months if the disease runs its normal course. This is particularly true for non-cancer diagnoses. Claims are susceptible to vagaries of interpretation by the FI. Certifying terminal illness is an inexact science and extremely difficult for the physician, patient and family. An FI determination that a patient is not terminally ill is also devastating.
ISSUE: Since 1986, terminally ill Medicare patients living in nursing homes could elect the Medicare hospice benefit (P.L. 99-272, Sec. 9505(a)(2). When a patient is entitled to both Medicare and Medicaid, the state Medicaid program must pay the hospice at least 95 percent of the nursing home charge for room and board services. The hospice then reimburses the nursing home for room and board: personal care, assistance with activities of daily living, administration of medications, socialization activities, maintenance of a resident’s room, supervision and assistance in the use of home medical equipment and prescribed therapies.

The contractual relationship between hospice programs and nursing homes has been under scrutiny by the Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Inspector General (OIG). In its report “Hospice Patients in Nursing Homes,” the OIG made recommendations to reduce the Medicare or Medicaid payments for hospice patients living in nursing homes. MedPAC is also focused on hospices that have many of their patients in nursing homes, and believes that these hospices may be taking advantage of a situation that is less resource intensive, thereby increasing their financial margins. MedPAC and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) have both indicated an adjustment in payments for hospice patients in NFs of between 3 and 5 percent may be appropriate.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) should not reduce payment to the hospice unless data collected and analyzed demonstrates duplicate payment for dually eligible patients residing in nursing facilities. Further, a thorough examination of the advisability of current CMS policy requiring that state Medicaid programs reimburse the hospice for the combined cost of nursing home and hospice (and that hospices then convey payment to the nursing home) may be in order at this time.

RATIONALE: If this action is taken without further data gathering and analysis of the nature and cost of hospice care provided in the nursing home, it could result in the complete lack of, or diminished access to, appropriate hospice services for these individuals. Changes to the hospice reimbursement and nursing home room and board reimbursement prior to an in-depth study (including analysis of the services provided and the cost of those services) will, in effect, deny access to a humane and compassionate approach to care for eligible terminally ill residents of nursing homes. Any adjustments to Medicare or Medicaid payments should be made only after performing appropriate data collection and analysis.
EXPAND THE USE OF AND REIMBURSEMENT FOR TECHNOLOGIES IN HOSPICE

ISSUE: Hospice care is for terminally ill patients who are expected to live six months or less if their disease takes its normal course. This care is typically provided in the patient’s home by a hospice interdisciplinary team (IDT), frequently with involvement of family caregivers or friends. The IDT usually includes a physician, nurse, aide, social worker, and chaplain. Thus, hospice care is a very personal, intimate service that is tailored to the specific needs of the patient and family members. While some hospices have developed sophisticated programs that utilize advanced technologies for clinical consultation, development of online support groups, and better communication with patients and their families, many hospices lack the financial capital to invest in technologies that could lead to better care management and enhanced patient satisfaction.

Family caregivers are responsible for giving medication to the patient, and they often have questions about patient care. The use of information technology would allow family caregivers to communicate changes and concerns, or to get advice from their hospice provider about specific care needs. For example, one study found that caregivers’ concerns about giving pain medication decreased when they were able to join team meetings via video conferencing technologies. Family caregivers and hospice staff reported improvements in communication and decision-making as a direct result of using the technology.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Administration should recognize the potential for improvements in communication, decision-making and care coordination by hospices as a means to provide higher quality care to hospice patients and support of family caregivers. Therefore, demonstration programs, grants, and other forms of reimbursement for tele-hospice and advance communication technologies in hospice should be tested along with new models of health care delivery to improve the delivery of hospice care in the home.

RATIONALE: Hospice care has a long standing tradition of providing care through coordinated teams of health care providers and family caregivers. Therefore, improvements in the communication, coordination and interaction among these caregivers will enable more timely and improved patient care, as well as allow for more efficient use of community services through engaging family caregivers and patients in the delivery of hospice care.
OPPOSE EFFORTS TO REQUIRE PHYSICIAN CERTIFICATION FORMS TO INCLUDE A FALSE CLAIMS WARNING

ISSUE: The Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General (OIG) issued its final report on hospice audits under Operation Restore Trust (ORT). The report, “Enhanced Controls Needed to Assure Validity of Medicare Hospice Enrollments,” recommended, among other things, to make “hospice physicians more accountable for their certifications of terminal prognosis by requiring that the certification/recertification forms signed by these physicians contain a statement concerning the penalties for false claims.” In its response, CMS stated, “Although CMS concurred with the intent of the recommendation, it did not agree with a warning statement. Instead, it indicated that a more affirmative flavor to the wording of the hospice certification would achieve the desired results.”

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should continue to refrain from including a warning statement concerning penalties for false claims on physician certification and recertification forms for terminal prognosis. In its stead, CMS should develop educational information about the requirement of a six-month prognosis and make resources available to determine a prognosis. Additionally, CMS should encourage the use of interdisciplinary clinical judgment and appropriate documentation.

RATIONALE: The Conditions of Participation (CoPs) require that the hospice obtain written certification of terminal illness for each of the benefit periods. The hospice medical director or physician member of the hospice interdisciplinary group and the patient’s attending physician, if the patient has one, must sign the initial certification; the hospice physician is then required to sign subsequent recertifications. The certification must specify that the patient has a prognosis of six months or less if the terminal illness runs its normal course. Additional language addressing the validity of the six-month prognosis would be redundant, unnecessary, and potentially harmful in limiting access to patients who would otherwise be eligible for hospice services.

The science of prognostication is in its infancy and physicians must use whatever tools are available, including medical guidelines developed by the industry, local coverage decisions developed by the MACs, and their own best clinical judgment. Physicians tend to be cautious about certifying terminally ill patients for hospice care; the median length of stay has remained relatively constant and is currently 18 days. Placing a warning or other statement on the certification of terminal illness could further deter physicians from enrolling appropriate patients, thus denying access to this compassionate, humane, patient-and family-centered care at the end of their lives.
CREATE WAIVER FOR EXCEPTION TO
SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION REQUIREMENT

ISSUE: The 2008 revisions to the Hospice Conditions of Participation (CoPs) require that, effective December 2, 2008, a hospice social worker either have a master’s degree in social work (MSW) or be supervised by an individual with a MSW unless hired prior to December 2, 2008. Many rural hospices struggle to find and retain qualified social workers, as defined in the Medicare CoPs. Specifically, the number of social workers with MSW degrees are extraordinarily limited nationwide and especially in rural areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CMS should create a waiver program under which hospices experiencing hardship in employing a MSW-level social worker may obtain an exception to the social work supervisory requirement.

RATIONALE: Most hospices across the nation serve fewer than 100 patients per day and many of these hospices are located in rural areas where they do not have access to qualified MSW-prepared social workers. As with other professionals, in particular registered nurses, the average age of the social worker is increasing. According to a study completed by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), in 2005 nearly 30% of social workers were over 55 years of age, compared with 14% of the US civilian labor force. At least 13% of these social workers have left the work force since the study was completed. While the majority of social workers have an MSW degree, many states do not require this level of education in order to obtain a state social worker license. Therefore, such states tend to have an extremely limited supply of MSWs available to the hospices for contracting for supervision.

There currently are hospices that have a vacancy for the required MSW supervisory position and have been looking to fill the vacancy for a significant number of months, or even a year or longer. The extensive distance between the rural hospice provider and its closest urban area is too great for the hospice to find an MSW-level social worker in the urban area who is willing to contract with the hospice. In fact, hospices in urban areas are reporting difficulties in hiring and retaining masters-level social workers, as well. The number of rural hospices without access to an MSW is expected to increase as the number of social workers in the United States decreases.

The hospice social work supervision requirement in the CoPs exceeds the standard most state licensure laws impose. The Medicare CoPs allow waivers of the requirement that all nursing services be provided directly and waiver of the requirement that physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech-language pathology be provided by a hospice. The reasons for these waivers are the same reason a waiver of the MSW supervision requirement should be implemented – a shortage of qualified professionals.
WORK WITH STAKEHOLDERS TO CLARIFY “RELATEDNESS” AND ADDRESS CODING ISSUES UNDER HOSPICE CARE

ISSUE: CMS found in 2010 that nearly 80% of hospice claims it received only had one diagnosis listed and in 2012 found that 72% of hospice providers still only provide one diagnosis on the claim (CMS did not indicate what percentage of claims this represents). Hospices are to include all of a patient’s coexisting or additional diagnoses that are related to the terminal illness on the hospice claim. The National Association for Home Care & Hospice and its affiliate, the Hospice Association of America, have provided education to hospices regarding proper coding practices per the ICD-9-CM Official Guidelines for Coding and Reporting and the companion publication, ICD-9-CM Coding Manual. The terms ‘comorbid’, ‘coexisting’, ‘secondary’, and ‘related/unrelated’ are used by CMS to provide guidance to hospices on which diagnoses should be on the hospice claims. This terminology (i.e. secondary, co-morbid, and co-existing) and other coding vernacular are causing confusion for hospices nationally. Some of the terms come from the outpatient coding guidelines of the ICD-9-CM Coding Manual. Outpatient coding guidelines are not applicable to hospice patients as stated in the Manual. Some others are not recognized in coding guidance. Because of this lack of clarity hospices cannot consistently and properly apply the terms and the coding guidelines. In addition, the CMS Medicare Administrative Contractors (MACs) do not use consistent language in the Local Coverage Determinations (LCDs) and other guidance they release. This lack of clarity results in inconsistent interpretation of the coding guidelines leading to inaccurate data on claims that CMS is using to make payment revision decisions.

Of particular concern is the interpretation of ‘related/unrelated’. These terms are used in the hospice industry for not only coding but also decisions regarding what medications and treatments are part of the hospice plan of care and paid for by the hospice. In 2013, CMS and its representatives communicated CMS’ view on what is/is not related to a patient’s terminal illness and related conditions through the Final Wage Index and to Part D Plan Sponsors through several memos. Specifically, a statement CMS made in its comments in 1983 when the Medicare hospice benefit was drafted has been reiterated. That statement is: It is our general view that ... “hospices are required to provide virtually all the care that is needed by terminally ill patients” Reiteration of this statement and comments by CMS and its representatives in 2013 may lead some to the conclusion that ALL care for terminally ill patients on hospice is the responsibility of the hospice. This has led to significant confusion in the health care sector. We also believe that for hospices, it is not so much the case that they are uncertain of the definitions of terminal condition and related conditions – each hospice’s clinical team makes these determinations on a daily basis; rather, hospices are increasingly concerned that medical determinations related to the hospice’s responsibility that are made by their trained clinical teams may not mesh with what CMS and its contractors believe to be related to the terminal condition and any related conditions.

RECOMMENDATION: CMS should work with the hospice industry to clarify the terminology applicable to coding for hospice patients. CMS should also work with industry stakeholders such as NAHC and HAA in development of educational tools that help hospices consistently and accurately apply ICD-9-CM coding guidelines.

CMS should collaborate with the hospice and medical fields to help bring greater clarity to the important area of establishing relatedness in end-of-life care. This would result in significant benefit to all involved. NAHC and HAA welcome the opportunity to work with CMS toward resolution on this issue.

RATIONALE: CMS stated in a December 6, 2013 memo “In order for services to be covered under the Medicare hospice benefit, those services must be reasonable and necessary for the palliation and management of the terminal illness and related conditions. We have not made a regulatory specification of services that are unrelated to hospice care because of the wide variation of individual patient
circumstances. These clinical decisions are to be made on a case-by-case basis.” This is consistent with the Social Security Act and the approach that CMS has historically applied in its administration and oversight of the hospice benefit. It appears that recent statements by CMS and its representatives are not consistent with this basic premise of the Medicare Benefit – that clinical decisions are made on a case-by-case by the physician and the hospice interdisciplinary group (IDG). This has caused confusion in hospice and other sectors of healthcare. In addition, lack of consistency across MACs in guidance provided to hospices regarding patient eligibility for the Hospice Benefit coupled with inconsistent application of the Hospice Benefit and hospice financial responsibility has created confusion and disruption in the hospice industry. CMS collaboration with the hospice and medical fields regarding clarification of terminology and determining “relatedness” will level the inconsistencies and help hospices properly apply the Hospice Benefit.
PROTECT HOSPICE PATIENT ACCESS TO PART D DRUGS FOR CONDITIONS UNRELATED TO THE HOSPICE DIAGNOSES

ISSUE: There is ongoing concern surrounding the potential for drugs covered under the Part A hospice benefit to be billed to Part D inappropriately. This was identified in a report by the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) and in investigations by the CMS Office of Program Integrity. As a result the Medicare Drug Benefit C & D Data Group and the Medicare Program Integrity Group provided direction to all Part D Plan Sponsors to (1) recover from hospices payment for any analgesics paid for by Part D plans in 2011 and 2012 while a beneficiary was enrolled in hospice and (2) develop a prior authorization process for all medications requested of Part D plans while a beneficiary is receiving hospice services. There is not an opportunity for the hospice to appeal the Part D plan decisions. We believe these actions run counter to current law and regulation that grants hospice beneficiaries coverage outside of the hospice benefit for services and medications that are needed for treatment of conditions unrelated to their terminal condition(s).

Some Part D plans have begun to deny all medications for enrollees receiving hospice. This has resulted in significant delays for hospice patients to receive necessary medications. It has also resulted in some individuals at end of life not electing hospice care which, in turn, increases Medicare costs. The blanket denials are despite the fact that CMS suggested to Part D plans to provide medications for enrollees receiving hospice care and retrospectively determine payment responsibility.

RECOMMENDATION: CMS should instruct Part D plans that across-the-board coverage denial practices are inappropriate and should cease immediately.

CMS should work with the hospice industry to develop a prior authorization process that is in line with the Hospice Benefit and to, further, develop oversight practices that hold hospices and Part D plans accountable for proper administration of the Medicare benefits they deliver.

RATIONALE: Some of the policies laid out in CMS’ direction to Part D plans may lead some to the conclusion that ALL care for terminally ill patients on hospice is the responsibility of the hospice. This has created much confusion in the healthcare industry and is delaying beneficiary access to medications.

The wide variation of individual patient conditions and circumstances require that, under hospice, care be based on an individualized plan of care. There are many examples brought to our attention by providers where an analgesic is reasonable and necessary for pain unrelated to the patient’s terminal prognosis – for instance long-standing arthritis or back pain. It is only through review of the individual patient’s plan of care and medical records that clear determination of responsibility can be definitively established and this is clearly the responsibility of the hospice’s interdisciplinary group (IDG).