

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC

February 23, 2023

The Honorable Denis Richard McDonough  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20420

The Honorable Chiquita Brooks-Lasure  
Administrator  
Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services  
7500 Security Boulevard  
Baltimore, MD 21244

The Honorable Gil Cisneros  
Under Secretary for Personnel Readiness  
Department of Defense  
14000 Defense Boulevard  
Washington, VA 20301

The Honorable Kiran Ahuja  
Director  
U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
1900 E Street NW  
Washington DC, 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough, Under Secretary Cisneros, Administrator Brooks-LaSure, and Director Ahuja:

We write to request information on the federal health benefits available to individuals who stutter. While progress has been made in recent years to lower barriers to accessing speech diagnoses and treatment resources, gaps in coverage within the benefits landscape persist. We request your help to better understand the current coverage for diagnosis and treatment for individuals who stutter under the following federal programs: Medicare, Medicaid, VA health care benefits – including CHAMPVA, TRICARE, and the Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program.

Stuttering is a speech disorder that creates disruptions in speech known as “blocks” that can present both verbally and physically. While the precise causes of stuttering remain unclear, stuttering is commonly classified as either “developmental” or “neurogenic” stuttering. Developmental stuttering generally presents in children as they are building their speech and language skills – manifesting due to a complex interaction of several factors including genetics and disparities between a child’s speech or language skills and their verbal demands. Neurogenic stuttering, which can develop following head trauma, prevents parts of the brain responsible for speech from working in tandem – resulting in interrupted or disjointed speech. Stuttering is not a matter of preparation, education, or diction, but rather an individual’s challenge overcoming blocks in their speech. Stuttering can be a deeply personal struggle, with symptoms that can vary in severity from day-to-day or can even vary several times within a single day.

To date, roughly five percent of children and one percent of adults in the United States stutter. Left untreated, stuttering can have devastating implications for a child’s social and emotional

welfare and development which, in turn, can majorly disrupt an individual's educational and professional development. Comorbidities that often present in individuals who stutter can include learning disabilities, attention deficits, behavioral and emotional challenges, social anxiety, general anxiety, and other mental health concerns. As this condition adversely affects a student's performance in the classroom, it can also impact that student's ability to graduate or pursue higher education. For adults, this can translate into diminished opportunity to pursue gainful employment or to advance in their career – with individuals who stutter often opting to pursue positions with less verbal communication regardless of their competency and despite lesser socioeconomic benefit.

Speech therapy and access to Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) remains one of the most effective ways to treat and manage an individual's stutter. Through speech therapy, individuals are educated on how to identify when they stutter and how to break down barriers in communication through specialized speech interventions.

To help us better understand current coverage policy and supports available to identify any existing barriers to care, we request information regarding federal coverage for the assessment, diagnosis, and follow-up speech therapy under the following programs: Medicare, Medicaid, CHAMPVA, TRICARE, and the FEHB program. Additionally, we request information on access to care and factors impacting access – including information regarding reimbursement, rates of diagnosis specific denials, and network adequacy.

Sincerely,



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Sherrod Brown  
United States Senator



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Bill Cassidy, M.D.  
United States Senator