

THE LEGISLATIVE BULLETIN

A PUBLICATION OF THE VERMONT MEDICAL SOCIETY

Week of February 2, 2009

Contact Us

P.O. Box 1457
Montpelier, Vermont 05601

Toll-Free: 800-640-8767
Fax: 802-223-1201

Online at: www.vtmd.org

Working for Vermont Physicians at the State House

Paul Harrington
Executive Vice President
pharrington@vtmd.org

Madeline Mongan
Deputy Exec. Vice Pres.
mmongan@vtmd.org

Stephanie Winters
Operations Director
swinters@vtmd.org

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VMS JOINS GOV. DOUGLAS IN ANNOUNCING EFFORTS TO MINIMIZE COST BURDEN TO PATIENTS

Resolution adopted at last October's annual meeting urges members to ask patients about food and heat security, refer help as needed.

VMS joined Gov. James Douglas at a press conference on Thursday touting a VMS-member supported initiative that enlists members in helping to assess patients' heating, food, transportation and other basic needs, and when necessary, directing them to available resources.

The initiative, which stems from a resolution passed by the VMS membership at last October's annual meeting, urges doctors and their staffs to ask at-risk patients questions pertaining to their overall well-being; such as if they are eating well, their homes are adequately heated and they have access to transportation to get to and from work and medical appointments. When appropriate, participating health care practitioners are asked to refer patients to the proper social service agencies, with most referral emphasis placed on Vermont's 2-1-1 system (see pg. 2 for more details regarding referring patients to 2-1-1).

In a press release issued by VMS at the press conference, VMS Vice President Dr. Paula Duncan said that physicians were uniquely positioned to identify those in need and encourage them to use available resources to receive assistance.

"As physicians, we often see our patients struggle with the difficult choice of paying for food, getting the medicine they need or keeping the heat on in their homes," said Dr. Duncan. "We want to be a resource. By serving as a bridge between those who need help and those who can provide it, we will hopefully alleviate some of the physical and emotional distress many of our patients are experiencing."

About the VMS Cost Burden Resolution

The resolution adopted by VMS members last October summarizes many of the financial difficulties facing Vermonters, details how they impact patient health, and "urges physicians and their staffs to ask at-risk patients if they are eating well and heating their homes."

The resolution calls for VMS to coordinate with local, state and federal organizations to provide practices with information for their patients regarding available social services. After further consultation with state health officials, VMS has determined that the most appropriate referral source is Vermont's 2-1-1 information system (more information below).

Also included in the resolution but not part of the VMS's public announcement with Gov. Douglas was language that called for VMS to work with lawmakers, agencies and payers to increase options for health care practitioners for treating patients in ways that reduce the cost burden for patients, i.e., telephone consultations and e-mail communications. As VMS moves forward on this issue much attention will be given to making sure that if these forms of consultations are adopted, practitioners are justly compensated for their work.

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EFFORTS TO MINIMIZE COST BURDEN

Continued from Page 1

Questions to Ask At-Risk Patients?

- Are you eating well?
- Is your home adequately heated?
- Do you have access to transportation to get to and from work and medical appointments?
- Is your economic situation causing severe stress?
- Do you need help meeting the basic needs of you and/or your family?

What is Vermont 2-1-1?

Vermont 2-1-1 is a simple number your patients can dial to receive information about health and human service organizations in their communities. Callers will speak with a real person every time. Trained call specialists will problem solve and refer callers to government programs, community-based organizations, support groups, and other local resources. Vermont 2-1-1 is:

- A local call from anywhere in Vermont.
- Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Access for persons who have special needs.
- Accurate info. on community resources in VT.
- Confidential telephone assistance.
- Live translation services for 170 languages.
- Ability to transfer emergency calls to 9-1-1.

What Kind of Services Can Patients Receive through 2-1-1?

Vermont 2-1-1 provides all people in Vermont with free access to community resources through information and referral (I&R). This access includes personal assistance by telephone and online through a searchable database of services, including the following:

- Child Care Resource and Referral
- Domestic and Sexual Violence Services
- Food Shelves and Nutrition Programs
- Alcohol and Drug Programs
- Transportation
- Housing (*Homeless Prevention, Shelter, Tenants' Rights*)
- And much more ...
- Crisis Services
- Employment Services
- Health Care Services
- Mental Health Care and Counseling
- Utility Assistance
- Youth and Family Services

To learn more about 2-1-1, visit www.Vermont211.org. To request brochures for your office call 2-1-1.

H. 24 – COLORECTAL CANCER SCREENING INSURANCE MANDATE

H. 24, introduced by Representative Steve Maier (D. Middlebury), chair of the House Health Care Committee, would require health insurers to cover colorectal screening in accordance with American Cancer Society guidelines and to limit co-payments for colorectal screenings to no more than \$25.00.

For an insured age 50 or older, coverage would be required to include one fecal occult blood test per year and either a flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years or colonoscopy every 10 years. For an insured who is at high risk for colorectal cancer, insurers would be required to cover screening examinations and lab tests recommended by the patient's treating physician.

Insurers would be required to cover the full cost of the screening. Copayments would be limited to the level of the copayments for primary care services under the insured's plan, but could not exceed \$25.00. Screening would not be subject to the insured's deductible or coinsurance requirements.

The bill is being taken up by the House Health Care Committee. **Please send any comments you have to VMS.** To view H. 24, visit <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/docs/2010/bills/intro/H-024.pdf>.

**GOVERNOR PROPOSES TO CUT MEDICAID REIMBURSEMENT TO PHYSICIANS
AND OTHER HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS BY \$12.2 MILLION
IN ORDER TO SAVE \$4.0 MILLION IN STATE EXPENDITURES**

VMS encourages physicians to contact members of the House and Senate appropriations committees and asked them to oppose these reimbursement cuts in order to preserve patient access to health services. Governor Douglas' State Fiscal Year 2009 (SFY2009) Budget Adjustment Act and his SFY2010 budget propose to cut physician and other provider Medicaid reimbursement in three areas by a total of \$12.2 million, effective April 1, 2009

Medicaid is paid for jointly by the federal government and state government and any reduction in payments to physicians would be significantly less than the savings to the state. President Obama's economic stimulus package contains a provision to increase the federal support for the state's Medicaid program from 60 percent to approximately 67 percent. With this additional federal financial support, Vermont would only save \$0.33 in state expenditures for every \$1.00 reduction in physician Medicaid reimbursement. The \$12.2 million cut in reimbursement to physicians and other health care providers would only save the state \$4.0 million in expenditures.

4-percent cut in provider reimbursement for all non-evaluation and management procedures. Total reduction impact \$7.3 million (\$2.4 million state savings) OVHA has recommended that Medicaid reimbursement for all non-evaluation and management procedures be reduced by 4 percent. This 4-percent reduction is on top of the 7.5-percent reduction for the same procedures that took place on July 1, 2005 (there has not been an increase for these procedures since that date). Under the proposal, reimbursement for evaluation and management codes (99201-99499) would not be effected by the reduction and they would continue to be reimbursed at the 2006 Medicare rate.

Reduce Primary Care and Case Management fees. Total reduction impact \$2.6 million (\$0.9 million state savings) OVHA has recommended that the Primary Care and Case Management fees paid to primary care physicians be cut from five dollars per month to \$2.50 per month. This reduction will put at risk a primary care case management program in which 60,000 beneficiaries select their Primary Care Provider (PCP) and access health services through a PCP working with them to assure high quality medical care.

20-percent cut in reimbursement for most procedures for Medicare/Medicaid dual eligible patients. Total reduction impact \$2.3 million (\$0.8 million state savings) OVHA has recommended paying crossover-claims at the Medicaid rate in instances where the patient is covered under both Medicare and Medicaid. Under this proposal, the state's Medicare 20 percent beneficiary co-insurance payment on behalf of the patient would be limited to the Medicaid amount. For procedures in which the Medicaid fee schedule is less than 80 percent of Medicare, physicians would receive no payment for the 20 percent co-insurance amounts paid by patients under Medicare Part B. The policy change could also result in an even greater cut in payment for psychiatric services, since the Medicare beneficiary co-insurance amount for these procedures is 50 percent. Under the proposed policy, primary care physicians would receive a 12-percent cut in their reimbursement for most routine office visits, since Medicaid is paying 88 percent of the current Medicare rate for 99213, the most frequently billed evaluation and management code.

With such a sharp cut in payments, some Vermont doctors will undoubtedly be forced to stop seeing Medicaid patients in order to simply stay in business. Unable to find physician care, these patients will be forced to use hospital emergency rooms the most expensive setting for care – thus increasing costs to the Medicaid program in the long-term.

As VMS President-elect Robert Tortolani, M.D., has pointed out, reimbursement cuts of this magnitude will force practices to restrict services to Medicaid beneficiaries, as well as potentially lay off staff. In order to reduce Medicaid expenses by \$4.0 million, the state is also cutting \$8.2 million in scarce federal funds currently being used to reimburse physicians and other health professionals. The loss of state income tax due to the resulting lower income and additional unemployed Vermonters would more than offset the limited savings to state government.

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MEDICAID REIMBURSEMENT CUTS

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In order to help ensure that Vermonters covered by the Medicaid program have continued access to medical services, VMS urges physicians to contact members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees by:

- Calling them at home (see numbers below) or leaving a message at the Statehouse at (802) 828-2228;
- Writing a letter to their home address, (see addresses below) or to their attention at 115 State Street, Montpelier, VT 05633; or,
- Writing to their e-mail addresses below.

House Appropriations Committee

Rep. Martha Heath, Chair, 342 Rollin Irish Rd., Westford, VT 05494 – (802) 893-1291 – mpheath@aol.com

Rep. Mark Larson, Vice-Chair, 64 Temple St., Burlington, VT 05401 – (802) 862-7596 – mlarson@leg.state.vt.us

Rep. Robert Helm, 728 Moscow Rd., Fair Haven, VT 05743 – (802) 265-2145 – rhelm@leg.state.vt.us

Rep. Joe Acinapura, 45 Park St., Brandon, VT 05733 – (802) 247-8403 – joeacinapura@verizon.net

Rep. Howard Crawford, P.O. Box 906, St. Johnsbury, VT 05819 – (802) 626-8226

Rep. William Johnson, Clerk, 3603 Rte. 102, Canaan, VT 05903 – (802) 277-8329

Rep. Kathleen Keenan, 8 Thorpe Ave., St. Albans, VT 05478 – (802) 524-5013 – kkeen@leg.state.vt.us

Rep. Ann Manwaring, P.O. Box 1089, Wilmington, VT 05363 – (802) 464-2150 – amanwaring@leg.state.vt.us

Rep. Alice Miller, 88 Horton Hill Rd., Shaftsbury, VT 05262 – (802) 442-9825 – amiller@leg.state.vt.us

Rep. Sue Minter, 900 Maggies Way, Waterbury Center, VT 05677 – (802) 244-6229 – sminter@leg.state.vt.us

Rep. John Morley, 26 Irasburg St., Orleans, VT 05860 – (802) 754-8450 – jmorley@leg.state.vt.us

Senate Appropriations Committee

Sen. Susan Bartlett, Chair, P.O. Box 123, Hyde Park, VT 05655 – (802) 888-5591 – sbartlett@leg.state.vt.us

Sen. M. Jane Kitchel, Vice Chair, P.O. Box 82, Danville, VT 05828 – (802) 684-3482 – janek45@hotmail.com

Sen. Vincent Illuzzi, 527 Ridgehill Dr., Newport, VT 05855 – (802) 334-2807 – villuzzi@leg.state.vt.us

Sen. Hinda Miller, 84 Deforest Heights, Burlington, VT 05401 – (802) 862-7008 – hmill@leg.state.vt.us

Sen. Richard Sears, 343 Matteson Rd., North Bennington, VT 05257 – (802) 442-9139 – rs@leg.state.vt.us

Sen. Peter Shumlin, 345 Hickory Ridge Rd., Putney, VT 05346 – (802) 387-4447 – senprespt@leg.state.vt.us

Sen. Diane Snelling, Clerk, 304 Piette Rd., Hinesburg, VT 05461 – (802) 482-4382 – dsnelling@leg.state.vt.us

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