Ensuring Access to Primary Care for Women & Children Act

Sponsored by Senators Sherrod Brown and Patty Murray

Access to affordable, quality health care is a critical source of economic security for families across the country. One of the ways the Affordable Care Act has helped expand families’ access to health care services is by aligning the payments that primary care physicians receive through Medicaid with Medicare’s higher payments. Because Medicaid provides coverage for millions of families, as well as access to critical health services for women, the Affordable Care Act’s provision providing pay parity between Medicare and Medicaid for primary care physicians has played an important role in meeting demand for primary care. Unfortunately, this provision is set to expire at the end of the calendar year, making it harder for women and families to find affordable primary care providers through Medicaid.

The Ensuring Access to Primary Care for Women & Children Act extends the alignment of Medicaid payments with Medicare payments, so that working families can continue to see the primary care providers who best meet their needs. The legislation would also expand the alignment in payments to include certain providers who are especially important to women’s health, including obstetricians and gynecologists, certified nurse-midwives, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants.

The Ensuring Access to Primary Care for Women & Children Act would:

- **Extend the current Medicaid payment increase for two years.** The Medicaid program plays a key role in providing coverage for millions of working families, including women. In 2013, the Medicaid program covered 62 million individuals, or 1 in every 5 Americans. This number will continue to grow as the Affordable Care Act expands coverage to millions of uninsured adults, which will significantly increase the need for primary care physicians.

- **Expand eligibility for the payment increase for primary care services to OB/GYNs, nurse-midwives, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants.** Women comprise the majority of Medicaid enrollees across all ages. In 2009, nearly three quarters of adult women enrolled in Medicaid were ages 18-44, of reproductive age. Six in ten women in this age group reported that they see an OB/GYN on a regular basis. Women are more likely to regularly see their OB/GYN than any other type of provider. In addition, nurse-midwives, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants are playing an increasingly important role in meeting growing demand for primary care. It is critical that this broader range of primary care providers receive reimbursement sufficient to participate in Medicaid.

- **Supports more efficient use of program dollars.** The Ensuring Access to Primary Care for Women & Children Act will align Medicaid payment rates with Medicare rates and expand this alignment to a broader range of primary care settings. In doing so, the legislation will ensure Medicaid dollars are used more efficiently, in particular by helping families avoid trips to the emergency room for treatment that is better suited to a primary care provider.

Many experts agree that higher Medicaid payment rates would increase the likelihood of providers accepting new Medicaid patients, increasing access to affordable health care coverage. Research also shows that because nurse practitioners and other mid-level health professionals, such as physician assistants, are trained to and already do deliver many primary care services, extending the pay increase to these professionals could also help increase access to primary care, particularly in underserved areas.