

December 23, 2012

Gary Cohen
Director
Center for Consumer Information and Insurance Oversight
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

RE: (CMS-9980-P) ACA Standards Related to Essential Health Benefits, Actuarial Value and Accreditation of Qualified Health Plans

Dear Director Cohen:

The Association of University Centers on Disabilities appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed rule *ACA Standards Related to Essential Health Benefits, Actuarial Value and Accreditation of Qualified Health Plans*. For healthcare reform to work for individuals with disabilities, the Affordable Care Act's (ACA) mandated benefit categories and non-discrimination provisions must be the foundation of the essential health benefits (EHB) packages that Americans in the individual and small group markets will depend upon starting in 2014.

AUCD believes strongly that the federal government must play a significant role in establishing and enforcing the ACA's nondiscrimination standards. The ACA provides an unprecedented opportunity to create a consistent and fair national insurance market, a particularly important opportunity for those Americans with disabilities and chronic conditions who have faced discrimination and variance in historically fragmented healthcare marketplaces. The rise of state insurance mandates themselves provides an example of an imperfect fix to a complicated problem that results in unequal care for Americans based upon their health conditions and geographical location.

AUCD understands that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is working to expand insurance coverage to the uninsured as quickly as possible under the ACA implementation timeline. Given the urgency of that important goal, AUCD proposes in this letter alterations and additions to the proposed regulation which are consistent with the overall benchmark structure which HHS proposes and which can be fairly easily adopted into a final regulation. Our recommendations will also help to ensure that the marketplace runs smoothly upon starting operations in 2014.

In addition, given the significance of the reforms for all Americans accessing healthcare in this country over the next century, we strongly urge HHS to continue developing a national infrastructure for the review and enhancement of the EHB packages in the future. This infrastructure should provide national leadership for the development, growth and

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enforcement of nondiscrimination standards in the healthcare insurance marketplace for the future, as envisioned by the ACA.

Standards For and Approval of EHB-Benchmark Plans

Once a state selects a base-benchmark plan, HHS and states will evaluate the plans in 2013 to determine if any changes are necessary to meet the standards for an EHB-benchmark plan. All EHB-benchmark plans must cover the 10 mandated categories of benefits listed in the ACA. As noted in the proposed rule, the ACA also requires the Secretary to define EHB in a manner that (1) reflects appropriate balance among the 10 categories; (2) is not designed in such a way as to discriminate based on age, disability, or expected length of life; (3) takes into account the health care needs of diverse segments of the population; and (4) does not allow denials of EHB based on age, life expectancy, or disability. ACA, Sections 1302(b)(4)(A) through (D).

AUCD recommends that HHS specify in the final rule that EHB base-benchmark plans must cover, at a minimum:

- Benefits routinely covered by the benchmark plan, regardless of whether those benefits are all listed in the data collection template used by states to report to HHS on their base-benchmark plan. For example, although kidney dialysis is not listed in the data collection template used by states to submit details of their base-benchmark plan, it is clear that the benefit is routinely covered by the benchmark plans and should be covered as an essential health benefit moving forward in 2014; and
- Cover all of the benefits within categories of care that list more than one benefit. For example, a plan should not be considered an EHB-benchmark plan unless it covers rehabilitative, habilitative, and devices as three distinct benefits, as opposed to only covering rehabilitation or only covering devices.

AUCD recommends that HHS specify in the final rule that appropriate balance standards require EHB benchmark plans to, at a minimum:

- Cover benefits explicitly listed within the 10 categories of benefits within the statute; and
- Cover EHB benefits across the continuum of care equally; that is, an EHB-benchmark plan cannot impose a financial requirement (such as copayments or coinsurance) or a quantitative treatment limitation (such as a limit on the number of outpatient visits or inpatient days covered) on one benefit category that is more restrictive than the predominant requirements or limitations that apply to other benefit categories.
- Cover all EHB benefits within the settings and by the specialists which provide the current standard of care for the benefit; and
- Prohibit substitution between categories of EHB; and
- Prohibit substitution between benefits explicitly listed by statute within a category of EHB; and
- Protect participant access to appropriate and medically necessary care when allowing substitution within benefits.

AUCD recommends that HHS specify in the final rule non-discriminatory plan design standards require EHB-benchmark plans to, at a minimum:

- Prohibit more burdensome participant cost-sharing on some benefits than others; and
- Prohibit unreasonable and arbitrary visit and dollar limits on a specific category of benefits, so as to discourage participation by individuals with certain conditions or disabilities; and
- Prohibit the targeted use of utilization management techniques for some benefits, and not others; and

- Prohibit defining the benefits in such a way to exclude coverage for those services based upon age, disability or expected length of life.

AUCD recommends that HHS specify in the final rule that EHB-benchmark plans take into account the health care needs of diverse segments of the population when the plans by:

- Establishing a process for participants to request and receive coverage for benefits not routinely covered by the plan; and
- Providing a process that allows an enrollee to request clinically appropriate benefits not covered by the health plan, as proposed for the prescription drug benefit; and
- Providing a process for participants to request and receive coverage for benefits beyond the limits set by the plan when medically necessary and appropriate; and
- Providing a process for participants to request and receive coverage of specialist care not routinely covered by the plan when medically necessary and appropriate.

Habilitation Standards for EHB-Benchmark Plans

HHS is proposing a transitional policy for coverage of habilitative services that would provide states with the opportunity to define these benefits if not included in the base-benchmark plan. Where habilitation is not covered by a base-benchmark plan, HHS will supplement with an alternative benchmark. When a benchmark is not available, states allow plans to define the benefit or give issuers the option to cover habilitation at parity or define the benefit for themselves.

AUCD recommends that HHS state in its final rule that when a state chooses to define the habilitation benefit, states must:

- Define the benefit consistent with the HHS Summary of Benefits and Coverage regulation. The Summary of Benefits and Coverage document provides plan participants with an explanation of what benefits are generally covered under a plan. States should define habilitation consistent with this definition so as to provide accurate and consistent information about the habilitation benefit to consumers, and accurate and consistent information to issuers and Exchanges.

AUCD recommends that HHS state in its final rule that absent a benchmark for habilitation, EHB-benchmark plans:

- Cover habilitation at parity with rehabilitation. That is, parity would be the default standard when a benchmark is unavailable or when a benchmark provides inadequate habilitation coverage, unless a state opts to define the benefit or a state elects to allow issuers to define the benefit without a standard; and
- Cover habilitation and rehabilitation consistent with definitions provided by the HHS Summary of Benefits and Coverage regulation.

AUCD recommends that HHS state in its final rule that plan coverage of habilitation satisfies appropriate balance and non-discriminatory plan design requirements when the plan:

- Covers habilitation separate and distinct from rehabilitation. For example, the plan cannot substitute rehabilitation for habilitation or apply only a single visit limit to both benefits.¹ Each

¹ Numerous states appear to have benchmarks which apply the single, existing rehabilitation visit limit to both the rehabilitation and habilitation benefit. For the majority of states choosing this option, this has meant a 20 visit limit for PT and OT combined whether it is rehabilitation or habilitation. This so severely limits the availability of the therapies it and would discourage enrollment by anyone in need of these medical services.

benefit must have separate and distinct visit limits which are applied based upon medical necessity, not based upon an arbitrary cap;² and

- Cover rehabilitation and habilitation services which *maintain* an individual's functional status, as defined by the HHS Summary of Benefits and Coverage regulation; and
- Prohibits the exclusion of specific conditions or diagnosis from accessing the benefit;³ and
- Covers habilitation in the same settings and including the same types of providers and specialists as covered in the rehabilitation benefit; and
- Prohibits the use of excessive cost-sharing requirements or utilization management tools targeting the habilitation benefit.

Mental Health Parity and EHB-Benchmark Plans

Mental health and substance use disorder services, including behavioral health treatment services, must be provided under EHB packages in a manner that complies with the federal parity standards detailed in the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008.

AUCD is concerned that unless the final rule provides necessary details regarding the application of parity to EHB, mental health and substance use coverage in these plans will not be at parity due to discriminatory and illegal practices, as well as well-intentioned practices that fall short because the state did not realize they were deficient.

AUCD recommends that:

- HHS specify in the final rule standards for how states should evaluate their benchmark plans for meeting mental health parity requirements.

Preventive and Wellness Services and Chronic Disease Management

All non-grandfathered individual and group market plans (which are not exempt from the EHB coverage requirement) must offer certain preventive and wellness services without cost-sharing, however, the proposed rule does not fully address the ACA-mandated benefit of chronic disease management. This is a major new benefit that has significant implications on people with disabilities and chronic conditions, but without further guidance, the benefit may be highly restricted under the EHB packages.

AUCD recommends that:

- HHS explicitly state in the final rule that it will collect data on chronic disease management services in order to evaluate the benefit in 2016.

Prescription Drug Benefit

People with disabilities or chronic conditions need access to a robust range of medications. In comments to HHS on the December 2011 EHB Bulletin, many health and disability advocacy organizations expressed support of Medicare Part D rules that set aside six therapeutic categories —antidepressants, antipsychotics, anticonvulsants, antineoplastics, immunosuppressants and antiretrovirals— and require plans to include “all or substantially all” of these drugs on their formularies. We recommend HHS include the Medicare Part D requirement to cover “all or substantially all” of the drugs in six protected classes of drugs in the final rules. Though positive changes were made related to prescription drugs, we strongly

² Setting distinct limits for habilitation is critical to patients attaining a functional ability for the first time. For example, a child with a developmental disability who is learning to speak for the first time will require access to a scope, duration and intensity of services than an adult relearning the skill after an injury.

³ For example, Tennessee appears to be limiting the rehabilitative and habilitative benefit to conditions resulting from an acute disease, injury, autism in children under age 12, or cleft palate. This suggests that individuals with other developmental disabilities such as intellectual disability or cerebral palsy would not be able to access rehabilitation or habilitation services.

believe the proposed EHB rule continues to fall short on ensuring patients have access to a full range of medicines, including new therapies. The proposed standard emphasizes a minimum number of drugs in a class without regard to the type of covered drugs, thereby potentially excluding certain drugs that may provide important therapeutic benefits. The quality of medications must also be emphasized in plan formularies.

We support the requirement that health plans must have procedures in place that allow an enrollee to request clinically appropriate drugs not covered by the health plan. Additionally, we recommend patients' rights and safeguards, such as grievances and appeals processes, are incorporated into the final EHB rule.

HHS should adopt a more comprehensive standard for prescription drugs that will provide critical access to medically necessary medications. At a minimum, HHS must not go below the proposed standard of "at least the greater of 1) one drug in every United States Pharmacopeia (USP) category or class; or 2) the same number of drugs in each category and class as the EHB benchmark plan. Additionally, HHS must work to ensure any future changes to the benchmark plans does not result in a reduction in scope of prescription coverage so that one drug in every category or class becomes the standard.

State Mandates

The ACA allows states to require coverage of benefits in excess of the EHB package, but states would be responsible for the costs of adding those benefits to the plan, not the federal government through premium subsidies. HHS proposes that state-required benefits (state coverage mandates) enacted on or before December 31, 2011 (even if not effective until a later date) may be considered EHB for at least plan years 2014 and 2015, which would include the costs of these state benefit mandates in the federal subsidies that flow to the exchanges. In addition, HHS proposes to allow exchanges to identify which state-required benefits, if any, are in excess of the EHB. HHS also proposes that the QHP issuer should conduct the calculation for the cost of additional benefits, because the QHP generates the necessary data regarding claims, utilization, trends, and other issuer-specific data typically used to calculate the cost of a benefit.

AUCD strongly supports the proposal to include all state-required benefits within the EHB plan and the proposal to allow exchanges to determine whether additional mandates fall within the ten categories of essential health benefits.

Updating the EHB-benchmark plans

The ACA specifies that the HHS Secretary periodically review the EHB, report the findings of such review to Congress and the public, and update the EHB as needed to address any gaps in access to care or advances in the relevant evidence base. HHS proposes to review in 2016 the benchmark-plan process for establishing EHB.

AUCD recommends that HHS specify that HHS will continue strong federal input and oversight of the EHB process and nondiscrimination standards, and specifically consider:

- Working with the National Association of Insurance Commissioners to formalize a committee designated to review and make recommendations on national health insurance nondiscrimination standards, including EHB standards, to CCIIO and HHS;
- Strengthening the Oversight office within CCIIO;
- Create or designate a department within the Office of Civil Rights to specifically address discrimination in the reformed insurance markets; and
- Formalize a process for stakeholders to regularly provide feedback on insurance market, EHB and non-discrimination standards and practices.

