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Protecting Medicare is vital to the well-being of our seniors (Independent Tribune)

This Week in Washington by Congressman Larry Kissell

More often than not, the solution to any one challenge is dependent upon, and unavoidably linked to, our ability to solve another problem. I saw yet another example of this last week in terms of how we honor our seniors by providing them with quality, affordable healthcare, and how we protect jobs in our rural communities.

During my tour of the district, I had the opportunity to visit a small business in Scotland County that is suffering under what were once well-intended reforms to Medicare reimbursement rates on durable medical equipment. I spent some time with Andy Ingram at Home Assist Medical Equipment Monday afternoon. Ingram's company supplies durable medical equipment (DME) such as wheelchairs, oxygen tanks and other types of home healthcare services to Medicare patients. During 2009, Ingram said his company experienced a 25 percent reduction in income despite no drop off in the demand for their services.

Ingram has been forced to eliminate 2 full-time positions and may not be able to continue offering these invaluable services to seniors because of these Medicare cuts. Mr. Ingram told me that 60 percent of DME companies, which were already only marginally profitable, were forced to close last year largely due to the vast reduction in revenues brought on by the cuts in Medicare reimbursements.

This is troubling for many reasons. First, home healthcare is vital to keeping our seniors healthy, independent and living in their own homes. Second, home healthcare jobs have been one of the few sectors we have seen experience job growth in our state in recent years. And now these policies are driving small companies out of business at a time when our economy is struggling to recover from the worst downturn since the Great Depression. And lastly, we do not need to mistake these cuts as the ones so many associate with waste, fraud and abuse in Medicare spending. These are across the board cuts that punish all providers.

So while legitimate firms are being run out of business, those who do not play by the rules are left to profit from their misdeeds, and continue to defraud the government, and all of us, of taxpayer dollars. Fraud and abuse must be investigated and prosecuted. Those who do business fairly and provide valued service for the fees they charge should be fully compensated for those services and should be allowed to continue to grow their businesses, and the economy.

As these legitimate service providers close their doors, seniors are left with very few options. This impact is most severely felt in our rural areas where there are already limited service choices. As these legitimate businesses are forced out of business by the reduction in Medicare reimbursements, many seniors would be left with no options and would be forced into a nursing home before they or their families feel it is time to make that decision.

Another damaging aspect of this situation is that, as fair vendors are driven out of the market, only those whose profits are inflated by fraud and abuse will remain in the market. Either way, this is not the honorable way to care for our parents and grandparents. I pledged to protect our seniors and to protect Medicare. It is a promise I intend to keep.

Home healthcare and the dedicated workers who provide these services help keep our seniors and disabled citizens healthier and happier. These services save money and allow folks to live independently in their own homes for as long as they are able to do so. Nursing home care costs are some of the most expensive associated with Medicare and Medicaid. And while they too provide a much-needed level of care, it only makes sense to care for people at home as long as possible.

We must do everything we can to protect our seniors and disabled citizens. They deserve the right to be treated with love, dignity and respect; and to be able to live as independently as possible for as long as practical. I have sponsored two bills to help reduce the negative impact on our home healthcare and DME agencies. H.R. 3790 amends the Medicare rule regarding durable medical equipment, and H.R. 2373 restores reimbursement for home oxygen therapy through the beneficiary's period of medical need.

In addition to these bills, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius announced this week \$4.3 billion in financial relief enabling states to continue to provide valuable services to residents eligible for Medicare and Medicaid. The funding will help states offset the cost of Medicare coverage for prescription drugs through the Medicare Part D program. North Carolina will save more than \$150 million under this one-time increase made possible by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. This is critical as our state (and many others) struggle to shore up gaps in state budgets while also protecting some of our most vulnerable citizens.

Two of the major issues facing our nation at this time are how to care for our senior citizens, and how to create jobs and grow the economy. Putting a halt to punitive Medicare reimbursement cuts that run responsible vendors out of business accomplishes both of these goals.

Protecting Medicare is vital to the well-being of our seniors. Keeping fair, caring, legitimate home healthcare service providers fully reimbursed for the work they do is a responsibility our nation must meet. It is time to put aside all the political bickering and posturing and work together to make sure our seniors are protected. I made a commitment to our seniors, and I will not allow anyone, or anything, to put them at risk.