American Society of Anesthesiologists

Improve Rural Health Care Access

Update the Anesthesia Rural Pass-Through Program

Many states face ongoing challenges in assuring access to medical care services for their citizens living in rural areas. Insufficient Medicare payments and low patient volume have made it particularly difficult for many rural hospitals to attract and retain qualified health care providers. In response to these challenges, Congress has enacted a variety of incentive programs to encourage providers to practice in rural areas. One such program is the anesthesia rural "pass-through" program – a program created as an incentive for anesthesia providers to practice in small, rural hospitals.

Under the "pass-through" program, eligible hospitals may use reasonable cost-based Medicare Part A payments in lieu of the conventional Part B Medicare payments to hire or contract with non-physician anesthesia providers, such as anesthesiologist assistants (a type of physician assistant) and nurse anesthetists. Unfortunately, under the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) current interpretation of the "pass-through" program, eligible hospitals are not permitted to use "pass-through" funds to hire anesthesiologists, creating a barrier to entry and limiting the types of medical services that can be safely furnished at these rural facilities.

Legislation introduced in previous Congresses, the bipartisan Medicare Access to Rural Anesthesiology Act, would have allowed rural hospitals to use already available "pass-through" funds how they see fit, and to employ or contract with all types of anesthesia providers – including anesthesiologists. Equipped with anesthesiologists, these rural hospitals will be able to provide a full complement of surgical and perioperative care to their communities.

Key Points:

- Low Medicare Part B anesthesia payments and low patient volume in rural areas make it difficult for rural hospitals to retain anesthesia providers.
- Current law allows eligible rural hospitals to use reasonable-cost Medicare Part A "pass-through" funds to employ or contract with non-physician anesthesia providers, but not anesthesiologists.
- The American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA), through formal comment, has requested that CMS permit rural hospitals to use the rural pass-through arrangement for all anesthesia providers, including anesthesiologists. CMS responded that it cannot permit hospitals to use the pass-through arrangement for physician services.
- Extending the pass-through arrangement to anesthesiologists allows eligible rural hospitals to utilize the rural incentive payment for all types of anesthesia providers.
- In rural hospitals, there is an acknowledged shortfall of physician health care providers. By extending the pass-through, rural hospitals can more readily recruit and retain physicians to provide lifesaving anesthesia and perioperative services in rural areas.

REQUEST:

Please support the Medicare Access to Rural Anesthesiology Act.

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