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MEDICARE PART B PAYMENT CHALLENGES

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Modernizing physician payment arrangements and related health policies can make care more affordable, accessible, and higher in quality.



Addressing Payment Challenges Associated With Medicare Part B

by Sarah Bender, Research Analyst

Nationwide, approximately 70 million older adults receive Medicare, many of whom live with chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension. Access to primary care is essential for these individuals, as they require comprehensive services to understand treatment options and improve their health and well-being.

Primary care providers include physicians in family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, geriatrics, and other specialties. The Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act (MACRA) of 2015 is now expiring, while the current administration appears to be prioritizing efforts to reduce chronic diseases.

Modernizing physician payment arrangements and related health policies can make care more affordable, accessible, and higher in quality. Currently, Medicare physician payments discourage primary care providers from participating in Alternative Payment Models (APMs). According to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), an APM is a payment approach “that incentivizes clinicians to provide high-quality, high-value care.” APMs may focus on specific conditions, care episodes, or patient populations.

The focus on Medicare Part B is critical because Medicare costs have risen sharply—from \$500 billion in 2023 to a projected \$1.17 trillion in 2034. Costs associated with Part B, which include laboratory services, home health services, physician-administered drugs, and more, have increased by over 80 percent since 2011.

One major challenge is that the Medicare Physician Fee Schedule (MPFS) tends to pay more for specialty services such as tests, scans, and procedures than for primary care services like routine exams, chronic disease management, and preventive screenings. This imbalance makes it more difficult for primary care clinicians to provide proactive, comprehensive care for patients with long-term health needs.

Past attempts to reform physician payments have been difficult. Policymakers have struggled to balance financial responsibility with fair reimbursement for services. The Sustainable Growth Rate (SGR), introduced over a decade ago, attempted to control spending by linking payment updates to economic growth but caused widespread issues. Congress responded by passing MACRA, which aimed to shift payments from a volume-based system that incentivized additional services to a value-based system using APMs that align the interests of clinicians, patients, and Medicare.

MACRA also created the Quality Payment Program (QPP), combining previous programs into two paths: the Merit-Based Incentive Payment System (MIPS) and Advanced APMs. Both link physician reimbursement to the quality of care provided, supporting improved patient outcomes and a more sustainable system.

Significance

The Bipartisan Policy Center identified several challenges associated with Medicare Part B. For instance, misaligned incentives may discourage APM participation. Clinicians are still more likely to choose fee-for-service (FFS) over APMs because bonus payments for Advanced APMs are expiring, and structural barriers make implementing new models difficult. After MACRA's passage, bonus rates have declined and are set to drop by 1.88 percent in 2026. Limited infrastructure support for launching APMs also discourages participation. Strengthening APMs would stabilize funding for clinicians and encourage better integration of primary care with behavioral and mental health services.

Furthermore, CMS lacks comprehensive data to accurately determine MPFS rates and evaluate how much federal healthcare spending is directed toward primary care. The current process relies heavily on recommendations from the American

MEDICARE PART B PAYMENT CHALLENGES

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Primary care clinicians face heavy reporting requirements and complex electronic health record (EHR) systems, which are particularly burdensome for small or rural practices with fewer resources



Addressing Payment Challenges Associated With Medicare Part B (cont.)

Medical Association's Relative Value Scale Update Committee (RUC), limiting transparency and adaptability. Policymakers argue CMS should have direct access to internal data to ensure that services are appropriately valued and resources are allocated fairly.

The excessive administrative burden placed on primary care providers presents another challenge. Primary care clinicians face heavy reporting requirements and complex electronic health record (EHR) systems, which are particularly burdensome for small or rural practices with fewer resources. On average, primary care clinicians spend 115 minutes per day on EHR tasks, compared to 85.7 minutes for nonsurgical specialists and 45.6 minutes for surgical specialists. These administrative challenges reduce time for patient care and exacerbate workforce shortages.

Federal Recommendations to Address Payment Challenges

The Bipartisan Policy Center recommends accelerating the adoption of APMs, which allow clinicians to collaborate across specialties, monitor patients' behavioral health needs, and deliver high-quality, cost-effective care. Congress can expand and reform bonuses for Advanced APMs to reduce financial disparities between FFS and APM participation.

Finally, the administrative burden on primary care can be reduced by aligning and streamlining APM reporting requirements. Consolidating electronic health record programs and expanding residency slots in primary care would strengthen the workforce, especially in rural and underserved areas.

Source

Strong, K., Neeck, M., Harootunian, L., Kennedy, A., Parekh, A., Burks, J. W., Hoagland G. W. (2025, June 24). Strengthening primary care: Medicare physician payment and related reforms. Bipartisan Policy Center. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/BPC-Strengthening-Primary_RV1.pdf

WEALTH BUILDING THROUGH RETIREMENT SAVINGS



WEALTH BUILDING THROUGH RETIREMENT SAVINGS

In Pennsylvania, 44 percent of private-sector employees lack access to retirement benefits.

Wealth-Building Through Retirement Savings

by Michael Shuba, Research Assistant

Background

Securing a retirement plan is an important step toward financial stability in the long term, and most retirement savings are acquired through employer-sponsored plans.[1] These assets represent substantial capital that can fuel economic growth and generate tax revenue. Nearly half the (private-sector) workforce lacks access to retirement benefits, however.[2] In Pennsylvania, 44 percent of private-sector employees lack such access. With its aging population, the state faces an especially urgent need to promote retirement savings.[3] According to Pew Research, “insufficient retirement savings in Pennsylvania could cost the state \$19.1 billion in additional social assistance over 20 years.”[4]

These benefits may consist of:

- Defined benefit plans
- Individual Retirement Arrangements (IRAs)
- 401(k) plans
- 403(b) plans
- 457 plans
- Employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs)
- Governmental plans
- Money purchase plans
- Multiple employer plans (as listed by the IRS)
- Payroll deduction IRAs
- Profit-sharing plans
- Roth IRAs
- SARSEP plans (Salary Reduction Simplified Employee Pension)
- SIMPLE 401(k) plans
- SIMPLE IRA plans (Savings Incentive Match Plans for Employees)
- SEP plans (Simplified Employee Pension)

Key differences between these plans include whether the plan is employer-sponsored or individually obtained; whether contributions are taxed at the time of deposit or upon withdrawal; the contribution limits; whether contributions are made by the individual, the employer, or both; and when required minimum distributions must begin.[5]

RAs are becoming a standard across the United States. As of summer 2025, 20 states have enacted programs for workers in the private sector – 17 of which automatically enroll employees with the option to opt out.[6] These auto-IRA programs also stimulate the private retirement plan market by increasing employer engagement, which in turn encourages small and mid-sized businesses that previously offered no retirement benefits to adopt IRA plans for their employees.[7]

Significance

Research suggests that people whose funds are automatically deducted from their paychecks are 15 times likelier to save for retirement than those without such deductions. In the 10 states with auto-deduction programs and for which data are available, savings have exceeded \$1.9 billion since 2017. Furthermore, the new Saver's Match federal tax credit will take effect in 2027 and allow for matches up to \$1,000 for the retirement accounts of eligible individuals.[8]

State-specific auto-IRA programming includes New York's Secure Choice program, New Jersey's Secure Choice savings program, and Virginia's RetirePath program.[9, 10, 11] In addition to the programs offered through the states, these policies have led to an increase in employer willingness to offer private options. This outcome also helps fulfill the objective of improving retirement security for workers.[12] It may also help attract workers to the Commonwealth, which like other states is facing a labor shortage.

WEALTH BUILDING THROUGH RETIREMENT SAVINGS



WEALTH BUILDING THROUGH RETIREMENT SAVINGS

Pennsylvania could save \$4.7 billion in social services expenses alone between 2025 and 2030 by implementing the Keystone Saves retirement program.

Wealth-Building Through Retirement Savings (cont.)

State Recommendation for Action: Support HB 577

The Commonwealth is actively pursuing similar legislation with its Keystone Saves retirement program, introduced by Representative Kyle Mullins. Initially a part of HB 577, which died in committee in June 2023, the Keystone Saves program was reintroduced in HB 1263 on April 17, 2025. It was passed by the House and referred to the Senate Finance Committee on May 22, 2025. [13, 14] If enacted, Keystones Saves would provide a state-operated IRA program. This program would give employees the opportunity to deposit a portion of their scheduled payroll into a portable retirement account. Small businesses with five or more workers – many of which do not have the capacity or resources to offer such benefits privately – would be required to participate. Pennsylvania could save \$4.7 billion in social services expenses alone between 2025 and 2030.[15]

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MITIGATING THE STUDENT LOAN DEBT CRISIS



MITIGATING THE STUDENT LOAN DEBT CRISIS

"The economic implications associated with student loan debt are similar to those associated with recession - consumer spending, business growth, and homeownership are adversely affected." [1]

Mitigating the Student Loan Debt Crisis

by Jill Avery-Stoss, President

Background

In May 2025, the Department of Education resumed the practice of referring defaulted student loans for debt collection. This activity follows a pause on federal student loan payments starting in March 2020, a reinstatement of payment requirements in 2023, and a one-year grace period that concluded in October 2024.

Currently, 90 days of non-payment constitute delinquency. Past-due accounts are reported to credit bureaus, and borrowers' credit scores are recalculated. If loans remain unpaid, collections processes may include wage garnishment and withheld tax refunds.

Lower credit scores and limited income mean it will be more difficult and more expensive for people to secure employment, rental housing, home and auto loans, auto insurance, and other financial supports. Personal bankruptcy filings may increase.

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York reported that approximately 25 percent of student loan borrowers were at least 90 days behind on their payments at the close of March 2025.

In Northeastern Pennsylvania, nearly 19 percent of the population carries student loan debt, on par with the Commonwealth's rate and higher than the national rate of 15 percent. The median amount owed is approximately \$22,000. Two percent of borrowers have defaulted, also on par with the Commonwealth's rate and higher than the national rate of one percent.

Significance

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), "More than 20 states have enacted legislation addressing student loan forgiveness programs." Throughout the three most recent legislative sessions, bills allowing forgiveness for health care providers have been most common.

Also, according to (NCSL):

"States continue to consider a range of measures to address student lending oversight including licensure of servicers, creation of student loan ombudsman, and expanded oversight of private lending options available to borrowers. In the last decade, at least 18 states have passed legislation expanding licensure and regulation of servicers and more than a dozen states now have specific ombudsman in place to address borrower complaints for student lending... Since 2019, at least 10 states have enacted legislation that would prohibit transcript withholding because of debt owed at higher education institutions."

Pennsylvania HB 2124 was enacted in 2018 to require schools to send letters to students to inform them about student loan debt. Since 2020, efforts to launch an income share financing pilot program (SB 1043) failed, along with efforts to enact "broad, comprehensive student loan debt forgiveness" (SR 48). HB 2360, establishing an Office of Student Loan Ombudsman, failed.

Proposed loan forgiveness measures for mental health and intellectual disability workers, alcohol and drug addiction counselors (SB 94), child welfare worker education (HB 628), dentists (HB 488), teachers (HB 2247), school counselors (HB 180), and nurses and health care workers (HB 226) failed as well.

SB 400 and SB 30 – providing for student loan debt data collection and reporting, disclosure of higher education costs, a student loan ombudsman, higher education assistance from employers, establishing a Student Loan Refinancing Program, etc., also failed.

MITIGATING THE STUDENT LOAN DEBT CRISIS



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Mitigating the Student Loan Debt Crisis (cont.)

Actions that are currently pending include:

- HB 1279, requiring resource advisors to equip students reporting sexual misconduct and considering withdrawal with information about student loan deferment, forbearance, and other options (referred to House Education Committee on April 22, 2025)
- HB 194, allowing loan forgiveness for mental health professionals (referred to House Human Services Committee on January 16, 2025)
- HB 813, ensuring that eligible student loan discharges are not taxed (re-referred to House Finance Committee on May 12, 2025)[2]

State Recommendations for Action

Support currently pending legislation. HB 194 in particular could address a component of student loan debt while also incentivizing students to consider careers in mental health – where there is a substantial shortage of workers.

Revisit and reintroduce legislation allowing for student loan forgiveness in areas of high workforce demand, along with legislation allowing for student loan debt data collection and reporting, disclosure of higher education costs, a student loan ombudsman, and/or higher education assistance from employers. A measure providing for broad and comprehensive forgiveness could deliver considerable impact.

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STATE LEGISLATIVE BRIEFING

A curated briefing of state legislative proposals and recent legislative actions

STATE BRIEFINGS

- Access to Pre-K Count Grants
- 988 Public Education Campaign
- Local Government Advertising
- PA as a National Leader in Economic Growth, AI Innovation, and Energy

House Bill 1505: Access to Pre-K Count Grants

On July 7, 2025, House Bill 1505 went through its third consideration and received final passage to the Pennsylvania Senate. Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts helps economically disadvantaged children access to free Pre-K services. Intermediate Units (IUs) across the state operate Head Start programs and risk losing eligibility for Pre-K Counts grants if the federal Head Start Program is eliminated or defunded. This legislation would amend the Public School Code to ensure that IUs remain eligible recipients of Pre-K Counts grants, regardless of changes made to the federal Head Start Program. House Bill 1505 was referred to the Education Committee.

House Bill 564: Creation of a 988 Public Education Campaign

House Bill 564 was introduced in early 2025 to create a public education campaign regarding the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Law enforcement frequently receives 911 calls involving individuals in mental health crises. Expanding the use of 988 could help reduce the number of 911 calls by directing individuals to appropriate mental health resources and support. Through the Department of Human Services and suicide prevention advocacy groups, efforts could focus on raising awareness of 988 and other local helplines, while also educating the public on the warning signs of suicide and available prevention methods. On July 14, 2025, House Bill 564 received final passage to the Pennsylvania Senate.

Senate Bill 194: Local Government Advertising and Notice Requirements

On September 8, 2025, Senate Bill 194 was laid on the table to allow the Pennsylvania Senate additional time and attention to fully consider it. Senate bill 194 would provide Pennsylvanians with easier access to local government events like board and committee meetings, bidding requirements for certain purchases and contracts, legal notices, and other official advertisements. Currently, these types of updates are available only in print newspapers. Considering the decline of print media and the growing reliance on the internet as a primary news source, however, this legislation seeks to expand efforts to ensure Pennsylvanians can continue to access this information.

Pennsylvania as a National Leader in Economic Growth, AI Innovation, and Energy

Under Governor Shapiro's leadership, Pennsylvania is shaping itself to become a model for economic development, innovation, and energy strategies. Governor Shapiro has introduced the Commonwealth's first Economic Development Strategy in nearly two decades, aimed at accelerating the completion of projects. In July 2025 Pennsylvania was listed as one of the top three states in the nation for AI Readiness, due in part to the Generative AI Governing Board that was established in September 2023. In January 2025, Governor Shapiro announced his Lighting Plan, which is a commonsense strategy to build more in-state power generation, create jobs, and lower utility costs for families and businesses.



STATE LEGISLATIVE BRIEFING

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STATE BRIEFINGS

- Governor Shapiro Visits IBEW Training Center
- Reverse Mortgage Counseling

Governor Shapiro Visits IBEW Local 163 JATC Electrical Training Center

On August 15 2025, Governor Shapiro visited Luzerne County to highlight his administration's historic investment in workforce development. The Commonwealth has significantly increased funding for vocational-technical programs, career and technical education (CTE), and apprenticeships to create pathways for Pennsylvanians to gain in-demand skills, secure well-paying jobs, and support business growth. Investments in the private sector have generated new opportunities and helped the Commonwealth secure record-breaking deals. The largest single private investment came from Amazon Web Services, which committed an initial \$20 billion to develop high-tech cloud and AI campuses across multiple locations, including one in Salem Township, Luzerne County.

House Bill 1466: Reverse Mortgage Counseling

On July 14, 2025, House Bill 1505 went through its third consideration and received final passage to the Pennsylvania Senate. The recent economic downturn revealed that many individuals enter into reverse mortgages to borrow against the equity of their homes without fully understanding the potential risks and drawbacks. This legislation would require Pennsylvanians to receive counseling from an approved financial counselor before initiating a reverse mortgage. HB 1505 was sent to Banking and Finance on July 22, 2025.





FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE BRIEFING

A curated briefing of federal legislative proposals and recent legislative actions

FEDERAL BRIEFINGS

- 119th Congress Overview
- Current Landscape of Bills and Resolutions

119th Congress Overview

Since the formation of the 119th Congress (2025-2026) in the beginning of January, 5,241 bills were proposed in the House and 2,732 bills were proposed in the Senate. There have been more resolutions, concurrent resolutions, and joint resolutions in the House (688, 47, and 118, respectively) compared to the Senate (381, 21, and 76, respectively). Conversely, the Senate has submitted significantly more amendments than the House (3,846 legislations and 83 legislations, respectively). There have been 36 pieces of public legislation enacted since the beginning of 2025, and although no private laws have been passed, six have been introduced.

Action by Congress was most common in the policy disciplines of health (with 876 bills and resolutions), taxation (with 702 bills and resolutions), and armed forces and national security (with 656 bills and resolutions). Other prevalent disciplines include government operations and politics, international affairs, crime and law enforcement, and public lands and natural resources. There were relatively few actions involving families; water resources development; animals; and arts, culture, and religion (with fewer than 50 bills and resolutions). [1]

Current Landscape of Bills and Resolutions Proposed in Congress

Approximately seven percent of the 9,244 bills and resolutions brought before the 119th Congress will become legislation. A total of 36 bills were signed by the President and have therefore been passed. Ninety bills with joint resolutions (which must be approved by both chambers in Congress) were enacted or incorporated into other bills. Over the last eight months, six bills and resolutions failed to pass legislation. With health being the main focus of the introduced bills and resolutions over the last couple months, 840 bills may be organized into subcategories. These subcategories include health care coverage and access (93 bills), health programs administration and funding (81 bills), health care costs and insurance (74 bills), Medicare (69 bills), and health personnel (62 bills).

Overall, 8,218 bills were introduced; 243 passed the House and 38 passed the Senate. Additionally, 284 bills and resolutions have received substantial numbers votes in one of the two chambers in Congress. Of the 36 legislations enacted and signed by the president, 11 related to different types of finances such as foreign trade or the economy and taxation. Another 11 were associated with energy; environmental protection; and science, technology, and communication. Seven measures pertained to Native Americans and public lands and natural resources. There were six measures concerning armed forces and national security and crime and law enforcement, as well as one law concerning immigration. The two most recent actions (in September 2025) included designating the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Toms River, New Jersey the "Leonard G. 'Bud' Lomell VA Clinic" (H.R. 2170) and the Homebuyers Privacy Protection Act (H.R. 2808). Specifically, the Homebuyers Privacy Protection Act is intended "to amend the Fair Credit Reporting Act to prevent consumer reporting agencies from furnishing consumer reports under certain circumstances, and for other purposes." [2]



FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE BRIEFING

A curated briefing of federal legislative proposals and recent legislative actions

FEDERAL BRIEFINGS

- Actions Taken by President

Recent Actions Taken by President

Since the presidential transition in 2025, the White House website has continued to update the listed actions taken by the current President. A total of 366 presidential actions were documented since January 20, 2025. Some of the most recent executive orders involve the change of the United States Department of Defense secondary name to the Department of War, adjustment of the reciprocal tariff scope, and new measures for administering trade and security agreements. Other executive orders established a framework for the United States and Japan trade agreement, addressed federal architecture, efforted to stop cashless bail, and offered additional "Exclusions from Federal Labor-Management Relations Programs." Various nominations and appointments by the President were also sent to the Senate in the beginning of September. Nominations were given for Commissioner of Labor Statistics, Federal Maritime Commissioner, Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis, Attorney for the Middle District of Pennsylvania, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, and United States District Judge.

Presidential proclamations pertained to Overdose Prevention Week, honor for the victims of the tragedy in Minneapolis, Minnesota; the fourth anniversary of the Attack at Abbey Gate, the 90th anniversary of the Social Security Act, and the adjustment of imports of copper into the United States. Other proclamations pertained to Made in America Week, Captive Nations Week, regulatory relief for certain stationary sources to promote American security with respect to sterile medical equipment, and regulatory relief for certain stationary sources to further promote American energy. Presidential memorandums gave the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) permission to control the advertisements of prescription drugs and instructed the Secretary of Education regarding "transparency in higher education admissions" [to consider technology advancements to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)] [3]

Sources

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