



So, What Happened with Medicare?

BY BARBARA KELLEY

I spent a lot of this time this year and some of last year about our high hopes to have Medicare expanded to include coverage for hearing aids and services. I wrote about it, was interviewed by major media outlets, and spent many hours on the Hill with Congress educating and advocating for Medicare expansion. We even got down to the nitty gritty details with the Senate Finance Committee and were successful in changing language to make it a real benefit to seniors with hearing loss. We mobilized you—our HCAA community—to write letters to your congressional members.

The number one call, email or letter we receive from people over the many years I've been with HCAA is that seniors who need hearing aids can't afford them. They ask: "Why aren't they covered by Medicare?" Even an affordable-type hearing aid could be out of reach for an older person on a limited income who desperately needs to hear and stay connected to everything and everyone who is important in life.

We came so close, so close that in private conversations with our staff, our board of directors, and colleagues in D.C., we rubbed our hands together in excitement and talked about how finally this could happen in our lifetime!

What happened with Medicare expansion to cover hearing aids and services? After all, it passed as part of the Elijah E. Cummings Lower Drug Costs Now Act through the House of Representatives on December 12, 2019. Then another version of Medicare expansion was included in the 117th Congress' Build Back Better Act of 2021 which passed the House of Representatives on November 19, 2021. If you look up the bill you will see the words specifically, "expand Medicare to cover hearing care." We were especially pleased with the language in the latter bill which expanded hearing aids for people with moderate to severe hearing loss, instead of just severe and profound loss. We worked hard to get the right language in the bill so the benefit would help those who need it. Important note: Medicare covers cochlear implants but not hearing aids.

We all thought the victory just might be at hand, finally, after years of work. But we also knew with Congress, anything could happen. We were cautiously optimistic more so than ever. We had worked so hard to make it a reality, it just had to happen. After all, what were all those hours of hard work for?

The Build Back Better bill died, plain and simple, with lots of politics involved. The Build Back Better bill was reinvented into a new, slimmed-down version known as the Inflation Reduction Act which passed the Senate on August 8, 2022, and was signed into law on August 16, 2022. Unfortunately, this new law doesn't expand Medicare to cover hearing aids and services.

What Happens Now?

HCAA continues to advocate for hearing aids and services to be covered under Medicare and private insurance companies. We are still meeting with members of Congress to continue to educate about how important hearing health is. We made a dent in the past two years with their level of understanding and commitment.

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HLAA is also a member of the Friends of the Congressional Hearing Health Caucus which will set upon a new agenda, to stay close to Congress on matters important to people with hearing loss. The Friends of the Congressional Hearing Health Caucus are both consumer groups like HLAA, professional hearing health care organizations and industry. Therefore, sometimes HLAA works alone on our agenda and sometimes within a larger group.

Look at how far we've come. In the pages of this issue, you'll read about over-the-counter hearing aids and the rules put forth by the FDA. Over the past few years, we've enlightened hundreds of lawmakers and their staff about hearing health. However, with new staffers and the mid-term elections likely to bring in new members of Congress, we'll have a new audience to introduce them to HLAA and hearing health.

We have a lot of work to do and have a strategic plan as Board Chair Kevin Franck explains on page 10. One of our strategic themes is to broaden our advocacy and influence. This strategic plan is our North Star for the work ahead of us.

Let's stay optimistic. If you are part of the HLAA community in any way — member, Walk4Hearing participant, chapter member, *Hearing Life e-News* subscriber, advocate, volunteer, a donor (or all of the above), you've bought into that optimism.

Together we will keep our expectations high and sustain our hope that certain things will happen. **HL**

Barbara Kelley is executive director of the Hearing Loss Association of America. She can be reached at bkelly@hearingloss.org. Follow her on Twitter @Bkelly_HLAA.



GET IN THE HEARING LOOP

It's Time to Get in the Hearing Loop

Many people aren't yet aware of hearing loops or other technologies that can improve communication access and public engagement, or how they can enrich the lives of people with hearing loss, their families, friends, colleagues and even communities. The Get in the Hearing Loop program is changing that — one loop, one advocate, one ADA request at a time.

Get in the Hearing Loop, a communication access program of HLAA, is dedicated to providing and promoting community education, advocacy on behalf of people with hearing loss and consultation services to help venues of all kinds successfully implement hearing loop technology.

We dream of a world where people with hearing loss can thrive each day with communication access, full inclusion and equal participation in all aspects of life, everywhere they go.

For more information about hearing loops and the Get in the Hearing Loop program, visit hearingloss.org/GITHL or email GITHLinfo@hearingloss.org.

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