

United States Senate

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Thune, Heitkamp Introduce Bill to Stabilize Access to Medically Necessary Equipment in Rural America

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sens. John Thune (R-S.D.) and Heidi Heitkamp (D-N.D.) this week introduced the Patient Access to Durable Medical Equipment Act of 2016, legislation that would provide durable medical equipment (DME) providers and patients in certain parts of the country with relief from harmful payment policies. DME providers help connect patients with medically necessary equipment like wheelchairs, hospital beds, and oxygen.

This bipartisan legislation would extend the current payment phase-in period of six months to 15 months, which is necessary to avert deep cuts in reimbursement for these products. Without action, these cuts could harm Medicare beneficiary access following the rollout of Medicare's new payment policies to areas like South Dakota and North Dakota.

“Accessing medically necessary equipment should be just as easy for someone living in a rural state like South Dakota as it is for anyone else living in the United States, which is why passing this legislation is so important,” **said Thune**. “Doing so would make it far easier for the federal government to properly implement this program to ensure anyone, no matter where he or she lives, can have access to these important health care products.”

“For seniors throughout the country, including in rural areas like North Dakota, access to critical medical equipment like hospital beds, walkers, and oxygen supplies shouldn't be a question,” **said Heitkamp**. “All seniors should be able to live with dignity and the support they need. Our bipartisan bill will enable a smoother transition for this program so North Dakota seniors continue to have access to needed medical equipment, without any interruptions.”

On January 1, 2016, the DME competitive bidding program began its nationwide rollout to South Dakota and North Dakota, two areas without competitive bidding areas. As a result, many areas, including rural areas, saw the first round of significant cuts, jeopardizing access to DME for beneficiaries. This legislation would correct this problem in a way that does not add to the federal debt.

Extending this phase-in until October 1, 2017, will allow Congress to properly monitor the rollout of this program – in real time – to ensure rural beneficiaries still have access to these medically necessary devices.

Also co-sponsoring this legislation are Sens. Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.), Shelley Moore Capito (R-W.Va.), Mike Rounds (R-S.D.), Steve Daines (R-Mont.), John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii), Michael Bennet (D-Colo.), Angus King (I-Maine), and Jon Tester (D-Mont.).

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