

W I S C O N S I N
O P T O M E T R I C
A S S O C I A T I O N
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Madison, WI 53719

TO: Representative Fred Kessler, Chair and Senator Luther Olsen Vice-Chair and Members of the Legislative Council Special Committee on Health Care Access

FROM: Peter Theo, Executive Vice President- Wisconsin Optometric Association

DATE: November 5, 2010

RE: Access to Vision and Eye Health Care Services

Good Morning Chairman Kessler, Vice Chair Olsen and members of the Committee. On behalf of the statewide membership of the Wisconsin Optometric Association (WOA), I am pleased to submit comments to your committee regarding health care access in Wisconsin and the important role doctors of optometry can play in improving that access.

Wisconsin doctors of optometry are primary health providers who specialize in the diagnosis, treatment and management of vision and eye health diseases. In addition to managing vision disorders, doctors of optometry treat physical and medical disorders of the eye using procedures such as the removal of foreign material from the eye and disease management through the use of medical prescriptions. Wisconsin optometrists practice across the state in both rural and urban areas in 68 of Wisconsin's 72 counties.

The WOA and its member doctors believe all citizens deserve quality vision and eye health care, including those who do not have access to, or cannot afford care. Any current barriers to access to quality vision and eye health care exist not as a result of a shortage of doctors of optometry, but rather in difficulties accessing optometric services through managed care plans and other third party payers.

Therefore, the WOA recommends the Legislative Council Study Committee on Health Care Access consider the following initiatives:

First, a truly consumer-oriented health care system in Wisconsin is based on the best "mix" of three key factors:

- Convenient access to care.
- High quality of care.
- Reasonable pricing of health care.

Of these three key variables, access to care is especially important. What good is high quality care, even if it is reasonably priced, if it is not accessible when a person needs it?

Therefore, we recommend maximizing the number of providers from whom consumers can access health care. To do this, consumers would be allowed to go to any health care provider who is in the area served by a particular plan, who provides care covered by the plan, and who agrees to the same terms and conditions of participation as other covered providers. This would include such provisions as quality of care, patient satisfaction, and pricing terms of the contract. We would not support mandating care, but rather require plans to allow providers who are licensed and qualified, to provide the covered services for their patients covered by the plans.

Second, we recommend enhancing Wisconsin's non-discrimination law to prevent insurers from excluding optometrists **as a class of providers** from health plans that offer **eye health and vision care**

benefits. One option to consider is using a provision from the recently enacted Federal Patient Protection and Affordability Act which provides protection against provider discrimination. This provision was sponsored by U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), and creates the first-ever federal standard of provider non-discrimination and will bar certain plans from discriminating against ODs and other providers. Beginning in 2014, health insurers, ERISA plans and the Federal Employees Health Benefit Program (FEHBP) would be prohibited from discriminating against licensed and certified health professionals with regard to health plan participation or coverage. However, the language will not prevent a group health plan, health insurer or the Secretary of H&SS from establishing varying reimbursement rates based on quality or performance measures. This provision could be added to the current Optometry Practice Act, specifically to section 449.015, which we believe would allow consumers to choose from a broader base of qualified providers.

In closing, we would like to thank Chairman Kessler, Vice Chair Olsen and each member of the study committee for your efforts to improve access to care. As health care costs continue to increase at a rate well ahead of the cost of living index, patients' access to care becomes increasingly more difficult. The WOA continues to support initiatives for the public to gain access to affordable health care services. Member doctors of the WOA ask for your support of the concepts presented in this letter. If you have any questions, please contact me at the numbers listed below.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

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Cc. Richard Sweet and Heidi Frechetts- Legislative Council