

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1602

February 21, 2019

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
United States Department of Health and Human Services
Hubert H. Humphrey Bldg.
200 Independence Avenue SW – Room 120F
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

The undersigned members of the Kansas Congressional delegation applaud your leadership in our nation's battle against the opioid epidemic. As you prepare to implement a series of medication assisted treatment (MAT) initiatives, we strongly urge you to bring addiction treatment into the 21st century through health information technology (HIT).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 72,000 Americans lost their lives to drug overdoses last year. This was a complex patient population with a high incidence of comorbid chronic diseases including HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis C, and serious cardiovascular conditions. Under your leadership, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) engaged in a multi-pronged effort to fight the opioid crisis, including increasing the number of people in substance abuse treatment.

We understand that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (CMMI) will soon announce a new bundled payment program designed to expand access to MAT. Further, the bipartisan SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act (Public Law 115-271) contains new Medicare and Medicaid MAT initiatives intended to enhance provider infrastructure and bring new treatment options to seniors and people with disabilities. The new law also included a new CMMI demonstration – spearheaded by our former colleague, Representative Lynn Jenkins of Kansas – authorizing HIT incentives to behavioral health providers.

These initiatives combine to create a unique opportunity to modernize addiction treatment. Specifically, as a condition of participation, substance use providers should demonstrate an e-prescribing capacity to prevent diversion. Similarly, treatment facilities should provide evidence that they can exchange clinical data with medical/surgical providers using HIT systems that comply with the latest Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT certification and interoperability standards. Finally, funds in all three of these demonstrations should be set aside to help mental health and substance use providers obtain Electronic Health Record systems.

Given the gravity of the opioid crisis, we strongly encourage HHS to seize this opportunity to equip front line treatment providers and facilities with the modern tools they so desperately need.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



STEVE WATKINS
Member of Congress



ROGER MARSHALL, M.D.
Member of Congress



RON ESTES
Member of Congress



SHARICE DAVIDS
Member of Congress