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January 31, 2012

The Honorable Vincent Gregory
P.O. Box 30036
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Senator Gregory:

Medicare is the nation's largest health insurance program, covering roughly 39 million older Americans (65 or older), and approximately 8 million Americans with disabilities. The program was established in 1965, and its mental health benefit has remained largely unchanged since that time.

Medicare has covered psychologists and clinical social workers since 1989, but does not cover licensed professional counselors. Many Medicare beneficiaries live in mental health professional shortage areas, and there are more than 120,000 licensed professional counselors across the country ready to provide needed treatment. Lack of access to outpatient mental health treatment harms beneficiaries, and contributes to overutilization of more expensive inpatient care.

Medicare coverage of counselors is not a partisan issue. The Senate passed legislation establishing Medicare reimbursement of licensed professional counselors in both 2003 and 2005, during Republican control of that chamber. The House of Representatives has also approved such language twice, in both 2007 and 2009, under Democratic control.

S. 604 will improve Medicare beneficiaries' access to outpatient mental health care in a cost-effective manner, by establishing coverage of highly-qualified LPCs. The current shortage of mental health professionals available to Medicare beneficiaries is going to get significantly worse over the coming years, as the baby boom generation enrolls in the program and current mental health service providers retire. Research shows that licensed professional counselors are proportionately more likely to work in rural and underserved areas than are clinical social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists.

I encourage you to support Senate Bill 604.

Very truly yours,

**PATRICIA E. KEFALAS DUDEK
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