

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

October 14, 2014

The Honorable Sylvia Mathews Burwell
Secretary
United States Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Burwell:

We are writing as strong supporters of health care delivery system reform in our nation. We believe that increasing systemic quality and focusing on patient outcomes is critical and we understand that making this substantive change will require us to adjust past measurements that were the underpinning of a system based on utilization rather than results. Recently, many independent experts have begun to study and make recommendations focused on this collective goal.

One that has garnered a lot of attention of late is the importance of accounting for socio-demographic factors in health payment policy and other applications. While we believe that all health care institutions must focus on high quality care, we also understand that institutions such as those that serve disadvantaged populations in lower income, geographically isolated urban and rural areas confront very different challenges than those that do not. We believe that it is important to account for such factors to ensure that there is access to quality care for disadvantaged populations and the ultimate improvement and needed stability for the delivery systems that serve them.

On October 6, 2014, President Obama signed the Improving Medicare Post-Acute Care Transformation (IMPACT) Act (P.L. 113-185) into law. We are strong supporters of the socio-economic status (SES)-related studies that were included in that legislation and urge you to instruct the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) to begin work on these studies immediately. This is a timely and pressing issue that cannot wait.

We know that homelessness, poverty, violence and geographic isolation in many communities impact, and in some cases overshadow, substantial health challenges. As stewards of our nation's health care system, we have a responsibility to recognize the primacy of these social factors, and encourage care management and outreach strategies that help those who not only need to manage their medical conditions, but also require assistance to connect to social and community supports. The need to support the whole-person to ensure that they receive the care they need is most profound in patients that have challenging SES circumstances and must be taken into account in how we measure our health care providers, and other related institutions' success.

Of course, there are populations that may not require these supplementary supports, but for those who do, this approach requires additional resources, workforce and time. We believe that measurements of quality and reimbursement approaches that tie payments to performance are vital to systemic excellence and we support these strategies. However, we are concerned that the current design of these quality payment systems inadequately measure or do not take into account the added delivery system challenges confronted by providers who serve vulnerable populations. As a result, we are concerned that these institutions will be unfairly impacted, jeopardizing access to care and supports to those people who need them most.

Recently, MedPAC, NQF and others have concluded that overlooking these factors may incentivize providers to avoid serving patient populations with challenging clinical and social circumstances. This concern requires our urgent action to ensure that we create quality payment systems using the correct information to determine which providers are truly providing quality care.

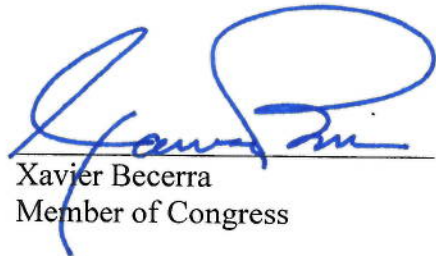
We wholeheartedly agree that there is much more to be learned about the pathways through which SES impacts health and cost outcomes and these studies will help in that effort. This is why we should not delay in ensuring that we are using the most accurate information possible to ensure that our health care system as a nation does not leave our most vulnerable seniors, children and families behind.

We look forward to continuing to work with you on this most important issue.

Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Xavier Becerra
Member of Congress



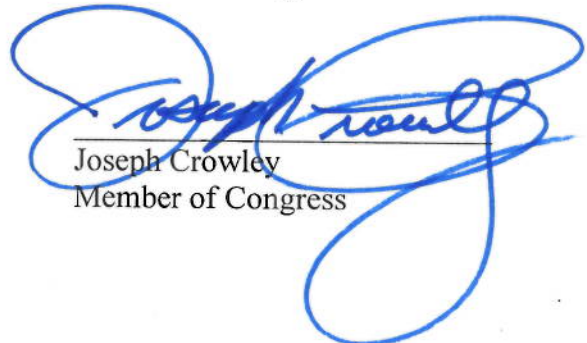
Bill Nelson
United States Senator



Eliot Engel
Member of Congress



Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



Joseph Crowley
Member of Congress