



Marianas Medical Center

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The Honorable Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan
United States Congressman
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands
P.O. Box 504879
Saipan, MP 96950

Dear Congressman Sablan:

Thank you for providing me an opportunity to submit my comments and to share my concerns regarding issues currently facing the CNMI Medicaid program, including insufficient federal funding, insufficient local match funding, and the recent decision to require that essentially all Medicaid services be provided at the Commonwealth Health Center. I believe that I can offer a unique perspective on the potentially devastating effects to the health status of the Medicaid recipients in the Commonwealth that these issues and decisions portend.

I am a University of Southern California medical school graduate and a residency-trained family physician. I have been practicing medicine in the Northern Marianas for more than 35 years, essentially my entire medical career. I moved to Saipan in 1984, as a DHHS/US Public Health Service/National Health Service Corps scholarship recipient to fulfill my NHSC medical school scholarship commitment of working in a medically underserved area.

The mission statement of the NHSC says:

Our Mission. The National Health Service Corps builds healthy communities by supporting qualified health care providers dedicated to working in areas of the United States with limited access to care.

THE NHSC website also says:

By addressing the primary care shortage, we:

**ensure access to healthcare for everyone, regardless of their ability to pay;
prevent disease and illness;
and care for the most vulnerable people who may otherwise go without it.**

In October of 1984, I began four years of service to the Commonwealth as an NHSC physician, initially at Dr. Torres Hospital, and subsequently at the Commonwealth Health Center; in 1988, I opened the first

private sector medical center in the Northern Mariana Islands, the Family Health Plan (FHP) Saipan office; and in 1998, I established Marianas Medical Center, my private practice family medical center, now in its 22nd year of service to the people of the CNMI.

As this illustrates, I have been intimately involved with the delivery of health care in the Northern Mariana Islands for more than 35 years, fulfilling the stated goals of the Department of Health and Human Services, the US Public Health Service, and the National Health Service Corps. I have had a front row seat to the health status of the people of the Commonwealth for more than 35 years and I have worked hard to help "ensure access to healthcare for everyone, regardless of their ability to pay; to prevent disease and illness; and care for the most vulnerable people who may otherwise go without it".

During these years, there have been many significant positive changes in the health care delivery system and improvements in the overall health status in the Commonwealth. I, and many others, have forged a successful and productive working relationship between the many public and private sector practitioners and entities, all working on the common goals of providing quality health care to all, continuous improvements in the islands' health care system, and most importantly, improvement in the overall health of individuals and the community.

The loss of sufficient Medicaid funding, from both local and federal sources, and removing the private sector's ability to provide services to the Medicaid recipients, whether temporary or long-term, will be an unfortunate huge step backwards, compounding the islands' many health issues. The Commonwealth Health Center does not have the capacity to provide care to all of the Medicaid patients, nor do they provide the same services as the private sector. The private sector arguably provides greater access to care (Marianas Medical Center alone provides care to more than 500 Medicaid patients per month, and rarely turns patients away), better continuity of care (patients are much more able to see the same provider and be seen sooner in the private sector, resulting in lessened disease progression and fewer hospitalizations), and enhanced efficiency in the utilization of scarce resources.

The private sector healthcare-related business community has taken many years to develop, often at great cost and effort, and offers many services simply not available at the Commonwealth Health Center. Ophthalmology, optometry, cardiology and dermatology services are examples of on-island care provided only in the private sector, greatly reducing the need for expensive off-island referral. Radiology, renal dialysis, mental health, pharmacy, and medical transport are additional services provided in the private sector that are either not available at CHC or supplement the services provided by the government hospital. Loss of funding for the services these businesses provide to Medicaid recipients, even if temporary, will place many of these businesses at risk, and ultimately the potential loss of that service to the people of the Commonwealth.

I can attest to the fact that the overall health status of the people of the CNMI has seen great improvements in the last 35 years, but it has not come easy and there is still a long way to go. Tremendous dedication on the part of many, both from within and without the Commonwealth, supported by both local and outside governmental and private entities, has been critical in the achievements made over the last many years. Likewise, maintaining the current health status and working toward continued improvements will require the continued support of these individuals and organizations, most especially, both the local and federal governments.

As is well known, the financial struggles of the Commonwealth due to the recent storms and costs associated with the recovery efforts, and the impact on tourism, are significant and cannot be ignored. However, the health of the people of the Commonwealth should not be ignored either.

In summary, the Medicaid program has been one of the most significant factors in the improvement in the Commonwealth's health status to date. Loss of this funding, both the local match and the federal contribution, will undoubtedly have severe consequences on the ability of all people of the Commonwealth to access quality health care, and consequently on their health. I strongly believe that the mission of the National Health Service Corps, which has guided my medical service on Saipan and throughout the CNMI for more than 35, is still shared by both the local and federal governments:

To ensure access to healthcare for everyone, regardless of their ability to pay; to prevent disease and illness; and to care for the most vulnerable people who may otherwise go without it.

Continued and increased funding, from both the CNMI Government and from the DHHS/Federal Government, is critical for the success of the ongoing efforts, as well as future efforts, in attaining the health care goals for the people of the CNMI.

Thank you again for providing me the opportunity to share and express my concerns. I sincerely hope that this will be given your highest priority and that a funding solution will be quickly realized in order to avert this impending health care crisis.

Regards,



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cc via email