- The Mental Health Access Improvement Act of 2021 (S. 828/H.R. 432) aims to close the current mental health coverage gap in federal law that excludes licensed professional counselors (LPCs) and marriage and family therapists (LMFTs) from direct billing and reimbursement under Medicare.
    - LPCs and LMFTs are not on Medicare's list of covered providers, which has not been updated since 1989.
    - LPCs and LMFTs make up an estimated 40% of all master's level mental health practitioners nationwide. This bill would increase the available mental health workforce by more than 200,000 additional providers to help address the rising need for mental health services across the U.S.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing mental health crisis by increasing social isolation and creating new barriers to care for those already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders.
    - Before the pandemic, 11% of older Americans reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder. By early 2021, that percentage had risen to 24%.
    - In 2021, older adults with low incomes (37%) or in poor health (48%) were even more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and depression.

- Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 30 million people were living in rural counties where mental health treatment is largely unavailable, with approximately 50% of rural counties in America having no access to any mental health clinicians. Moreover, nearly 60% of mental health professionals who do work in rural areas are counselors not covered by Medicare.

- Adding LPCs and LMFTs to the Medicare-covered provider list would ultimately save the healthcare system money by investing in early interventions to improve outcomes before mental and physical conditions worsen. Both LPCs and LMFTs would likely be paid less than 60% of a psychologist's rate for mental health services, and timely, accessible care

- Policy experts recommend adding LPCs and LMFTs to the Medicare-covered provider list.
  - For example, SAMHSA's Interdepartmental Serious Mental Illness Coordinating Committee recommended in 2017 that Congress "remove exclusions that disallow payment to certain qualified mental health professionals, such as marriage and family therapists and licensed professional counselors, within Medicare."
  - The Bipartisan Policy Center task force recommended in 2021 that Congress should increase the mental health provider types covered under Medicare to address shortages in rural areas while dissolving some federal reimbursement barriers to integrated primary and mental health care.

## ED A C AC

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## ADD A E CE

"Restricted Access to Mental Health Providers for Medicare Beneficiaries: A Long-Standing Inequity Congress Should Address" (ACA Issue Brief) PDF can be downloaded HERE.

ACA Government Affairs & Public Policy web page on Medicare Reimbursement
ACA Press Room

## AB ACA

The American Counseling Association is a not-for-profit, professional and educational organization that is dedicated to the growth and enhancement of the counseling profession. Founded in 1952, ACA is the world's largest association exclusively representing professional counselors in various practice settings.

Our mission is to enhance the quality of life in society by promoting the development of professional counselors, advancing the counseling profession, and using the profession and practice of counseling to promote respect for human dignity and diversity.

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