

February 14, 2018

FAQ: Answering Your Questions About the Budget Deal Passed by Congress

On Friday, February 9, 2018 Congress passed and the president signed a sweeping budget deal that makes numerous changes to health care programs, funds community health centers, delays cuts to safety net hospitals, includes provisions addressing chronic care, and permanently repeals the Medicare therapy caps on physical and occupational therapy services. The Arthritis Foundation released a statement about the agreement last week, which you can check out [here](#).

Read on to learn more about the bipartisan budget agreement and what it means for the arthritis community.

How is this budget agreement different than the one passed by Congress in January?

In January, after a three-day government shutdown, Congress passed something called a continuing resolution to keep the government running through February 8. A continuing resolution is used by Congress to fund the government when it can't come to an agreement on a budget.

The bill passed on February 9 is also a continuing resolution, but includes one important difference – Congress reached an agreement on a longer-term budget deal that raises federal spending caps, and includes a variety of other health policy changes that could impact the arthritis community.

What are some of the health policy changes that could impact the arthritis community?

- It **permanently repeals the Medicare payment cap for outpatient therapy services**, which has been in place for nearly two decades. The therapy cap limited the amount of outpatient rehabilitation services that the Medicare program would cover. The Arthritis Foundation has long supported repeal of these arbitrary caps.
- It **ensures that biosimilars will be subject to the same discounts as branded biologic medicines in the Medicare Part D coverage gap** or “donut hole,” which could help make them more accessible to patients. Medicare Part D is the prescription drug benefit offered to Medicare beneficiaries.
- It adds an **extra 4 years to the reauthorization of the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP)**. In January, Congress passed a six-year reauthorization of the program, after nearly 100 days had passed since funding originally expired. Nearly 9 million children in the U.S. depend on CHIP for their health care, including many children with juvenile arthritis. The bipartisan agreement passed last week would ensure funding until 2027.

- It includes an **additional \$2 billion in new funding for research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) over the next two fiscal years**. This means that important research programs at all NIH Institutes and Centers, such as the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, can expand in the search for novel cures and therapies.
- It includes nearly **\$500 million for the National Health Service Corps** for the next two years, which helps place health care providers in rural and underserved communities.
- It includes **authorization of the CHRONIC Care Act**, which seeks to streamline care for Medicare beneficiaries with chronic condition, with an emphasis on telemedicine.
- It **fully repeals the Independent Payment Advisory Board (IPAB)**, which was intended to curb the growth in Medicare spending. Although it never went into effect in its nearly eight-year history, the Arthritis Foundation was concerned that patient access to quality care would be jeopardized if IPAB spending cuts were triggered.
- It fixes an issue with the way health care specialists such as rheumatologists were going to be paid for the administration of Medicare Part B drugs in their practices. Without the fix, there was the potential for some providers to stop offering infusion therapies covered by Medicare.

What happens next?

- Although Congress has taken a strong bipartisan step forward to increase spending on public health priorities supported by the Arthritis Foundation, work will continue to implement the bill in a way that ensures arthritis programs and research are protected.
- **The continuing resolution lasts until March 23, at which time another bill will need to pass in order to keep the government funded.**
- We encourage our Arthritis Foundation community to read upcoming newsletters for more information and opportunities to take action.
- We welcome your feedback and questions to advocacy@arthritis.org, and want you to know you can always use the Arthritis Foundation as a resource and sounding board. We are here for you.