

HEALTH CARE

Federal health care programs and agencies tangibly affect the lives and well-being of every American. Medicare provides health care services to the nation's elderly and disabled, and Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) serve low-income individuals. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DOD) provide health care services to veterans and those in the armed services, including their dependents and retirees. Public health agencies sponsor and perform research, conduct regulatory oversight over new drugs and medical devices, and undertake efforts to improve the nation's public health, including the preparedness to identify and ameliorate the medical consequences of naturally occurring events or bioterrorist threats or attacks. The Health Care team reviews these federal health-related programs and agencies that are responsible for meeting the health care needs of an aging and diverse population.

Our Work

Health Care's work involves many and diverse federal health-related programs whose expenditures represent approximately one-quarter of all federal spending. Much of our work concentrates on the ability of these programs to provide access to quality care while paying appropriately for that care. We also examine the activities of federal public health agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Our work at federal health agencies examines not only their achievement of program goals but also their management, information systems, human capital, and financial operations.

Typically, our work focuses on the following topics:

- reforms, financing, and operations associated with Medicare, Medicaid, SCHIP, and the VA and DOD health systems;
- trends and issues in private insurance coverage, including those related to the uninsured population;
- effectiveness of public health programs, including their ability to detect and respond to naturally occurring and bioterrorist events; and
- strategies for financing and overseeing the delivery of chronic and long-term health care services.

KEY CONTACTS

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Accomplishments and Key Projects

Some of our recent accomplishments include

- assessing the effects of Medicare's methods of setting payments to hospitals, physicians, nursing homes, and other providers, and recommending modifications to preserve or promote beneficiary access to appropriate services and to increase program efficiency;
- examining management of the Medicare fee-for-service program, including its decentralized administration through a network of contractors;
- determining that VA and DOD could save hundreds of millions of dollars annually through increased joint pharmaceutical purchasing;
- analyzing the trends and characteristics of the uninsured to assist Congress in considering public and private expansion options;
- assessing federal capacity to respond to bioterrorist threats to assist Congress and the administration in efforts to restructure federal preparedness and response capabilities;
- informing Congress on current and emerging health workforce shortages to support efforts to respond to this growing problem; and
- identifying significant shortcomings in efforts to protect nursing home residents from abuse and to ensure that home health beneficiaries receive quality care.

Key ongoing projects include

- examining access to physician services for Medicare beneficiaries to identify the need for potential modification to program payments, medical liability policies, or future health workforce subsidies;
- reviewing Medicare's processes for covering new procedures and medical devices;
- determining the extent to which states monitor access to care and utilization of services for children eligible for Medicaid and SCHIP;
- evaluating DOD's management of its health care delivery system, focusing on the physician network and claims processing;
- analyzing VA's delivery of health care services, including its hepatitis C initiative and expansion of long-term care;
- assessing key drivers of premium growth in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program and comparative efforts of other major public and private employers to contain cost growth in employer-based health insurance coverage;
- evaluating state and local preparedness to respond to bioterrorist and significant public health epidemics and threats; and
- analyzing policy options to respond to growing financial pressure on federal and state budgets to provide appropriate, high-quality, long-term care services.