



*Independence Through  
Enhancement of  
Medicare and Medicaid*  
COALITION

**PRESS RELEASE**  
December 21, 2004

Contact: Emily Niederman  
(202) 349-4260

### **ITEM Coalition Views CMS Announcements on Wheelchair Policy as “Mixed Bag”**

[Washington, DC] – The ITEM Coalition today recognized the importance of CMS’ new direction in setting Medicare wheelchair coverage policy based on a functional assessment of each beneficiary, rather than whether or not beneficiaries are considered “bed or chair” confined, but expressed disappointment with the pace of progress and CMS’ apparent refusal to adequately address the “in the home” restriction.

On December 15, 2004, CMS released recommendations drafted by the Interagency Wheelchair Workgroup (IWWG) that serve to initiate the NCD process for wheelchairs under Medicare. Including the current 30-day comment period, CMS will have up to 6 months to develop a draft decision memorandum. An additional comment period will follow the release of that memorandum.

CMS’ announcement to begin the NCD process signals a more formal, time-limited procedure in which to review Medicare wheelchair coverage policy. But it also signals an additional delay in CMS’ handling of this issue.

“We were awaiting the release of actual draft guidance from CMS, but instead, we seem to be at the beginning of this process, again. We are hopeful that CMS will accelerate its timeframe so that beneficiaries do not lose access in the meantime,” stated Kim Ruff-Wilbert of the United Spinal Association and an ITEM Coalition Steering Committee Member.

The ITEM Coalition applauds the IWWG for recommending functional criteria as the basis for coverage of wheelchairs and considers these recommendations to be important steps toward a more comprehensive benefit. However, the ITEM Coalition continues to be disappointed by the perpetuation of CMS’ interpretation of the “in the home” restriction in the IWWG’s recommendations.

The “in the home” restriction (originally meant to define durable medical equipment (DME) as devices that were provided outside of an institution such as a hospital or skilled nursing facility and, therefore, warranted separate reimbursement under Medicare Part B) has been interpreted by CMS to restrict coverage only to wheelchairs and other mobility devices that are reasonable and necessary within the beneficiary’s home.

“The ‘in the home’ restriction severely impedes the health and independence of individuals with disabilities as it essentially confines people to the four walls of their homes and does not take into account the need for beneficiaries to access their physician’s office, pharmacy, grocery store, bank or place of worship,” stated Peter Thomas, also a member of the ITEM Coalition Steering Committee. “Unless the new criteria include a functional assessment of the beneficiary’s needs outside of the home in the person’s community, the criteria will continue to deny access to appropriate wheelchairs for Medicare beneficiaries,” continued Mr. Thomas.

“The NCD process and the proposed functional criteria are important steps forward but we call on CMS to reconsider its current interpretation of the ‘in the home’ restriction and encourage the agency to use this opportunity to fix a benefit that has long been broken,” stated Lee Page of the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) and ITEM Coalition Steering Committee Member.

The ITEM Coalition (“Independence Through Enhancement of Medicare and Medicaid”) is a consumer-led coalition formed in 2003. Its over 70 member organizations include a diverse set of disability organizations, aging organizations, other consumer groups, labor organizations, voluntary health associations, and non-profit provider associations. The ITEM Coalition’s purpose is to raise awareness and build support for policies that will improve access to assistive devices, technologies and related services for people of all ages with disabilities and chronic conditions. For more information on the ITEM Coalition, please go to [www.ITEMCoalition.org](http://www.ITEMCoalition.org).

###