

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Plaskett Introduces Legislation To Improve Medicaid And Medicare in U.S. Territories

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Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett

Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett recently introduced legislation aimed at providing parity for U.S. territories in federal health care programs like Medicaid and Medicare, Mrs. Plaskett's office announced on Monday.

The Improving the Treatment of the U.S. Territories Under Federal Health Programs Act of 2017 (H.R.2404), would eliminate existing inequalities the territories face under Medicaid and Medicare. It would also provide them with their fair share of funding for

these programs beyond the 2019 “fiscal cliff”, when much of the existing funding for the territories is set to expire, according to the release.

“People in the territories should have just as much access to health care as anyone else. With federal attention focused on how health care disparities have contributed to the financial crisis in the territories, we believe that this is an opportune time to press the issue of Medicaid and Medicare. The inequities in federal funding provided to the territories for Medicaid and Medicare has placed a significant financial burden on local governments, including in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and has further exacerbated their respective financial situations. It has also put access to affordable health care out of reach for too many Virgin Islanders, making our hospitals’ emergency rooms the primary health care provider for the one-third of our population without health insurance, which contributes to unmanageable costs in uncompensated care,” Plaskett said.

Ms. Plaskett’s bill would remove the low limit on federal matching funds and the existing statutory cap on overall federal funding for Medicaid in the territories. Without these limits, the program would be capable of expanding and contracting by local needs, as it is on the mainland. The bill also prescribes an equitable formula for Medicaid Disproportionate Share Hospital (DSH) payments to the territories beginning in the fiscal year 2019, the release adds, and grants the territories authority to waive or modify Medicaid requirements currently in place.

Additionally, regarding Medicare, the bill would increase overall reimbursement rates for hospitals in smaller territories like the Virgin Islands, and extend Medicare DSH funding to hospitals in these territories—funding that is currently extended only to hospitals in Puerto Rico.

H.R.2404 is co-sponsored by Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle: Reps. Madeleine Bordallo (Guam), Jenniffer González-Colón (Puerto Rico), Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen (American Samoa), José Serrano and Nydia Velázquez (New York).

Questions relative to the measure's progress, and whether the delegate believes it has a strong chance of succeeding, were not answered at time of writing.