Health Law Daily Wrap Up, AGENCY NEWS—HHS funding will expand care to underserved, fight growing areas of concern, (Feb. 24, 2016)

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HHS Secretary Sylvia Burwell explained to the House Energy & Commerce Committee’s Health subcommittee where the money from the President’s fiscal year (FY) 2017 budget for the agency will go. According to Burwell, the budget would allow the agency to encourage and assist any additional states that choose to expand their Medicaid programs under section 2001 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) (P.L. 111-148). Other areas of agency focus include health delivery system reform, strengthening programs in U.S. territories and better serving American Indians and Alaska Natives, preventing drug abuse, and expanding behavioral health care.

ACA-based initiatives. Burwell led with the investments that the agency believes will build upon the ACA’s efforts to expand access to care. The budget would allow any state that decides to expand its Medicaid program three years of full federal funding, as well as extend funding for the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) through FY 2019. HHS also intends to invest more in health centers, which offer primary health care services to all patients, regardless of coverage. Expanding access to care includes a focus on support for the health care workforce serving rural areas and underserved communities, strengthening the health of American Indians and Alaska Natives, and improving the Medicaid programs in the U.S. territories.

Delivery system reform. HHS intends to pursue its efforts in changing the way health care is provided to patients as well as how providers are paid. The shift toward rewarding care for value instead of the amount of services provided will continue through encouraging more competition in Medicare Advantage (MA) programs and participating in alternative payment models. The agency also intends to push for more telehealth services, especially for rural areas.

Prevention, wellness, and areas of concern. The agency hopes to combat prescription drug abuse by expanding the use of opioid addiction treatment, including the use of naloxone, and improving prescribing practices. Behavioral health is also a huge area of focus, as less than half of those with mental health disorders receive necessary treatment. The agency proposes using $999 million to increase service capacity, boost the workforce, and engage those in need of care.

Medical and scientific research will continue through increased funding to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which will pursue ways to treat antibiotic resistant bacteria, expand cancer research, and expand in new initiatives. The focus on precision medicine, which bases treatment on each patient’s genetic characteristics, will get a boost through an additional $107 million in funding. The NIH’s BRAIN initiative, which attempts to better understand the neurological and psychiatric conditions, will get an additional $45 million.