

How Rhode Island's ACEP Chapter Secured a Large Medicaid Reimbursement Hike in the Face of State Budget Shortfall

Thanks to Michael J. Mello, MD, MPH, FACEP, President of the Rhode Island Chapter for providing the information and insight that went into this report.

Emergency physicians in Rhode Island were saddled with excessively low reimbursement rates from Medicaid. They were reimbursed at a flat rate of \$15.48 per Medicaid patient. Regardless of acuity, every Medicaid patient they treated resulted in a payment of \$15.28.

Just about everyone who heard about the rate agreed that it was too low, including the head of the Rhode Island Department of Human Services. However, for the last few years, despite the best efforts of Rhode Island ACEP, they weren't able to get a rate hike enacted. And with the state facing an increasingly worsening budget crisis, prospects for getting a rate increase this year seemed daunting.

But Rhode Island ACEP continued to wage the good fight. With this as the chapter's top priority, chapter leaders embarked on a campaign to educate emergency physicians to the reality of the Medicaid problem. Members of the chapter's board attended hospital staff meetings across the state to generate understanding and support among their members.

The chapter also worked hard to make this issue a top priority with the state medical society. As a small chapter, Rhode Island ACEP knew that it needed the added clout of the medical society to be successful in a legislative initiative. Once the medical society placed it on its agenda, then the chapter, which did not have a lobbyist of its own, could take advantage of the services provided by the medical society's lobbyist.

The chapter then got personally involved in the lobbying effort. Chapter leaders met with key committee members, sent letters to all other legislators and met with the head of the state's Department of Human Services. They also provided an emergency department tour to an influential committee chair. Ultimately, those efforts paid off and despite severe budgetary restraints, the legislature passed a budget that included a significant increase in Medicaid reimbursement. The new plan is acuity-based with Level 1 cases still paying \$15.48, but Level 5 cases paying \$92.55. The chapter estimates that the average rate payment will actually triple from the \$15 level to about \$45. The change will result in an additional \$700,000 in Medicaid reimbursement for emergency medicine.

Interestingly, in meetings with key officials after the rate hike passed, some state officials told chapter leaders how appreciative they were of the work that was done by the emergency medical community in the wake of the tragic nightclub fire in Rhode Island that killed 100 people. Emergency medicine personnel received positive exposure in the news media in the days following the tragedy. And to some degree, the decision to increase the Medicaid reimbursement rate may have been state officials' way of expressing their gratitude to the specialty, in addition to addressing a clearly inadequate reimbursement system.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Personal Proactive Involvement:** The chapters leaders invigorated the membership by embarking on an education campaign. Throughout the legislative process, they met personally with key decision makers and convinced the influential committee chair to

tour an emergency department. (See the Mini-Internship section of the *Physicians' Guide to State Legislation* for information on conducting effective tours.)

2. **Coalition Building:** For a small chapter like Rhode Island, enlisting the active support of the state medical society was critical to its success. By convincing the medical society to make this a priority item, the chapter not only expanded its reach and its clout, it also was able to benefit from the services of the medical society's lobbyist.
3. **Perseverance:** For the past few years, the Rhode Island chapter had pushed this issue. And while they found a lot of understanding and sympathy, they didn't find any relief. It is said that the wheels of justice turn slowly, but the same is typically true in the legislative process. It often takes more than one legislative session to attract sufficient awareness, understanding and support among legislators.
4. **The Power of Positive Media Exposure:** While the Rhode Island chapter leaders did not actively promote the work of emergency physicians during the nightclub fire tragedy, their willingness to work with the media in the wake of that disaster undoubtedly enhanced the public image of emergency medicine. While this may not have been the key factor in getting the rate hike passed, it certainly helped.