

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5986

As of January 10, 2024

Title: An act relating to protecting consumers from charges for out-of-network health care services by prohibiting balance billing for ground ambulance services and addressing coverage of transports to treatment for emergency medical conditions.

Brief Description: Protecting consumers from out-of-network health care services charges.

Sponsors: Senators Cleveland, Muzzall, Hasegawa, Kuderer, Mullet, Nobles, Randall, Salomon, Valdez and Wellman.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Health & Long Term Care: 1/12/24.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Establishes balance billing protections for certain ground ambulance services.
- Requires health carriers to provide coverage for ground ambulance transport services to behavioral health emergency services providers for enrollees who are experiencing an emergency medical condition.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH & LONG TERM CARE

Staff: Greg Attanasio (786-7410)

Background: In 2019, the Legislature passed the Balance Billing Protection Act (BBPA), which prohibited balance billing for emergency services and certain nonemergency services. In 2020, Congress passed the federal No Surprises Act (NSA), which establishes federal protections against balance billing for emergency services, including air ambulance services, and certain other services provided at in-network facilities. In 2022, the Legislature amended the BBPA to align provisions with the NSA. Under the BBPA as

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amended, a nonparticipating provider or facility may not balance bill an enrollee for:

- emergency services provided to an enrollee;
- nonemergency health care services performed by a nonparticipating provider at certain participating facilities; or
- air ambulance services.

This includes covered services provided by a behavioral health emergency services provider.

A behavioral health emergency services provider means emergency services provided in the following settings: a crisis stabilization unit, an evaluation and treatment facility, an agency certified to provide outpatient crisis services, a triage facility, an agency certified to provide medically managed or monitored withdrawal management services, and a mobile rapid response crisis team contracted with a behavioral health administrative services organization (BHASO) to provide crisis response services in the BHASO's area.

Nonemergency health care services performed by nonparticipating providers at certain participating facilities are the covered items or services other than emergency services with respect to a visit at a participating facility as provided in the NSA.

A health care provider, health care facility, or air ambulance service may not request or require a patient at any time, for any procedure, service, or supply, to sign or otherwise execute any document that would attempt to avoid, waive, or alter the balance billing provisions. If an enrollee pays a nonparticipating provider, facility, or air ambulance service more than the in-network cost-sharing amount determined under the NSA and the implementing regulations, the provider must refund the excess amount within 30 days. If an enrollee receives emergency services from a behavioral health emergency services provider the enrollee satisfies the obligation to pay if the enrollee pays the in-network cost-sharing amount specified in the enrollee's group health plan contract.

Payment and dispute resolution between carriers and providers for services covered by the balance billing prohibitions, except for emergency services provided by behavioral health emergency services providers, are governed by the NSA and implementing regulations. For covered services provided by a behavioral health emergency services provider the payment must be a commercially reasonable amount based on the same or similar service provided in a similar geographic region. If the parties fail to agree to a commercially reasonable amount, the dispute must be resolved under the state's arbitration process.

The Office of the Commissioner (OIC) must develop a template to notify consumers of their rights under the Balancing Billing Protection Act, and the NSA and its implementing federal regulations. Hospitals, ambulatory surgical facilities, and behavioral health emergency service providers must post a list of the carrier health plan networks with which they are in-network on the facility's website, and if they do not have a website this information must be available upon request.

The amended BBPA directed OIC, in collaboration with the Health Care Authority (HCA) and Department of Health (DOH), to submit a report and any recommendations to the appropriate legislative committees detailing how balance billing for ground ambulance services can be prevented and if ground ambulance services should be subject to the balance billing prohibitions.

As part of its work, OIC convened an advisory group of stakeholders to review the types of ground ambulance providers in the state, the funding structures, and issues that would need to be addressed to eliminate balance billing. In October 2023, OIC released its report, which included the following policy recommendations:

- a prohibition on balance billing for emergency and nonemergency transports and applying the prohibition to public and private providers;
- reimbursing ground ambulance services at applicable local jurisdiction fixed rate, or if no local rate exists, at the lesser of a fixed percentage of Medicare or billed charges; and
- requiring coverage for emergency transport to alternative sites, which are behavioral health emergency services providers, including crisis stabilization facilities, evaluation and treatment facilities, medical withdrawal management facilities, and other crisis providers.

Summary of Bill: Beginning January 1, 2025, a nonparticipating ground ambulance services organization may not balance bill an enrollee of a health plan for covered ground ambulance services. For the purposes of this act, ground ambulance services means:

- the rendering of medical treatment and care at the scene of a medical emergency or while transporting a patient to an appropriate emergency services provider when the services are provided by one or more ground ambulance vehicles designed for this purpose; and
- ground ambulance transport between emergency services providers, emergency services providers and medical facilities, and between medical facilities when the services are medically necessary and are provided by one or more ground ambulance vehicles designed for this purpose.

A ground ambulance services organization is a public or private organization licensed by DOH to provide ground ambulance services.

Beginning January 1, 2025, a health carrier must provide coverage for ground ambulance transports to behavioral health emergency services providers for enrollees who are experiencing an emergency medical condition. A health carrier may not require prior authorization for these services if a prudent layperson acting reasonably would have believed an emergency medical condition existed. Coverage for these services may be subject to applicable in-network cost sharing.

If an enrollee receives covered ground ambulance services, the enrollee satisfies their

obligation to pay for the ground ambulance services if they pay the in-network cost-sharing amount specified in the enrollee's or applicable group's health plan contract. The amount paid by the enrollee must be applied toward the enrollee's maximum out-of-pocket payment obligation. The allowed amount paid to a nonparticipating ground ambulance services organization for covered ground ambulance services under a health plan must be one of the following amounts:

- if a local governmental entity has submitted a rate to OIC in the form and manner prescribed by OIC, the rate set by the local governmental entity in the jurisdiction in which the covered health care services originated will be used; or
- if a local governmental entity has not submitted a rate, the rate will be the lesser of:
 1. 325 percent of the current published rate for ambulance services as established by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services for the same service provided in the same geographic area; or
 2. the ground ambulance services organization's billed charges.

The local governmental entity is responsible for providing any updates to the rate submitted to OIC and a carrier may reasonably rely on the published rate.

Payment made in compliance with one of these options is payment in full for the covered services provided, except for any cost-sharing amounts required to be paid by the enrollee. A ground ambulance services organization may not request or require a patient at any time, for any procedure, service, or supply, to sign or otherwise execute by oral, written, or electronic means, any document that would attempt to avoid, waive, or alter any provision of these payment terms.

OIC must review the reasonableness of the 325 percent of Medicare rate for ground ambulance services considering the relationship of the rate to the cost of providing ground ambulance services and any impacts on health plan enrollees that may result from health plans increasing in-network consumer cost-sharing for ground ambulance services due to increased rates paid. By October 1, 2027 or October 1st following an update in the Medicare ground ambulance payment rate, whichever is sooner, OIC must submit its report on the review to the Legislature.

Behavioral health emergency services providers and ground ambulance services organizations are added to the providers OIC must consult with when developing a template to notify consumers of their rights under the BBPA. Ground ambulance service organizations are also added to the list of providers that must post a list of the carrier health plan networks with which they are in-network on the provider's website, if the provider has a website, and if they do not have a website this information must be available upon request.

A carrier must provide enrollees with a notification that if the enrollee receives services from an out-of-network ground ambulance service organization for services not covered under this act, the enrollee will have the financial responsibility for those services.

If OIC has cause to believe that any ground ambulance services organization has engaged in a pattern of unresolved violations related to the balance billing provisions of this act, OIC may submit information to DOH or the appropriate disciplining authority for action and DOH or the appropriate disciplining authority may levy a fine up to \$1,000 per violation and take other action as permitted.

Self-funded group health plans may opt in to the provisions of this act.

OIC, in consultation with HCA, must contract for an actuarial analysis of the cost, potential cost savings, and total net costs or savings of covering services provided by ground ambulance services organizations when a ground ambulance services organization is dispatched to the scene of an emergency and the person is treated but is not transported. OIC must submit a report to the Legislature on the outcome of the analysis by October 1, 2025.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy, in collaboration with DOH, HCA, and OIC, must conduct a study and develop recommendations on whether emergency medical services should be treated as an essential health service provided by state and local governmental entities and funded exclusively by federal, state, or local governmental entities as a public health service.

The statutory provision requiring a report on ground ambulance balance billing, which has been completed, is repealed.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 9, 2024.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.