

Testimony of Kandi Perazzo, MA, RD, LDN
House Democratic Policy Committee Public Hearing
April 9, 2012

Good afternoon, members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. My name is Kandi Perazzo. I am a licensed Registered Dietitian from Allentown and I am here today asking that you work on legislation that would recognize Registered Dietitians as providers in all health insurance plans in our state.

From my perspective as a Registered Dietitian, we are licensed healthcare providers in the state, yet insurance companies do not consistently recognize us as providers under their plans. This creates barriers to access to cost-effective services that could save our state money and improve the health of our citizens. It also creates health disparities among our citizens. I am the owner of a small private practice specializing in weight management and sports nutrition. I currently do not accept insurance because of the details involved in obtaining coverage for patients and the disparity in what I would be reimbursed versus what I charge. This results in some potential clients who need to look elsewhere for someone who will accept their insurance.

In the past, I have been employed by Coordinated Health as the Highmark Personal Nutrition Coaching Registered Dietitian. I also facilitated nutrition classes for Highmark members. Because I know that Highmark offers personal nutrition counseling for members, I am obligated to tell potential clients that if they have Highmark, they may be entitled to free visits with a participating location/dietitian.

Recognition of registered dietitians by insurance plans is important because we are licensed healthcare providers in the state, meaning the state has recognized the fact that we are qualified providers of nutrition services. We are also the experts in nutrition, having a bachelor's degree along with a comprehensive internship in which we gain necessary competency to practice in clinical, community and foodservice management settings. Many of us have higher degrees, and we are required to obtain a specified amount of continuing education yearly to stay current in our field. We use evidence-based practice, which means we base our nutrition recommendations on what has been proven to work, not on theories or the nutrition fad of the moment. In this way we benefit the public by offering sound advice that has been proven to achieve results.

There is a multitude of data that demonstrates the cost-savings of RD-provided nutrition counseling. As just one example, a study conducted at Massachusetts General Hospital demonstrated savings of \$4.28 for each dollar spent on MNT. MNT services provided by RDs are less expensive than physician office visits and hospitalizations for complications of disease such as diabetes that could be averted by nutrition interventions. Also, nutrition interventions

can reduce and even eliminate the need for costly long-term medications to treat chronic diseases.

Nutrition and diet are known to be associated with seven of the top ten leading causes of death in the United States today, including the Big Three: heart disease, cancer and stroke. Diet and nutrition are also factors in other chronic conditions such as pulmonary disease, diabetes, liver disease, arteriosclerosis and kidney disease. Nutrition also plays a major role in curbing the obesity epidemic facing both children and adults across our state. Lack of access to RD-provided medical nutrition therapy services certainly has had an impact in the escalating prevalence of these conditions and the associated growth in the costs of treating them. Opening up access to these services from the nutrition experts can help to rein in spiraling health care costs in our state. Access to proper preventive services from a Registered Dietitian, or proper medical nutrition therapy to manage a disease before it is out of control, could have a major financial impact on the economy by preventing absenteeism and lost wages, and by increasing worker productivity. It would also greatly improve the quality of life of the citizens of PA, allowing them to live healthier lives.

Access to medical nutrition therapy services provided by Registered Dietitians addresses medical concerns of great importance to enrollees in health plans. The “Nutrition and You: Trends 2011” survey reveals that just over one in ten Americans are “very interested” in the services that dietitians provide. This number jumps to one in three for African-Americans, a group that has higher rates of obesity and diabetes. This same survey notes that six in ten consumers say they would be interested in a consultation with a Registered Dietitian if it were covered by health insurance.

MNT is a medical service that has been proven to be safe and medically effective. The key to the effectiveness of these services is the registered dietitian as the provider of the service. The Institute of Medicine has previously acknowledged registered dietitians as the “single identifiable group of health-care professionals with standardized education, clinical training, continuing education and national credentialing requirements necessary” to be recognized as providers of these services.

Summary:

Once again, I ask that you work on legislation that would recognize Registered Dietitians as providers in all health insurance plans in our state. Our citizens/we deserve consistent access to these licensed healthcare professionals.