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## LOCAL NEWS HEADLINES

### Changes to Medicare Oxygen Coverage Alarms Patients



Oxygen- a lifesaving treatment for countless people in the U.S. And many of those people depend on Medicare to help cover the majority of the cost of their oxygen medical equipment.

But a little known portion of a bill making it's way through Congress may mean an eventual end to that help.

Hidden deep inside the federal Deficit Reduction Act is a provision that would cap the amount of money many respiratory patients depend on to pay for their oxygen.

Elizabeth Donegan, 81, of Springfield suffers from a progressive pulmonary disease. Her oxygen concentrator turns room air into lifesaving oxygen. Without it, she would struggle to breath and oxygen levels in her blood would fall to dangerous levels. "It makes a great deal of difference - otherwise I`d be sitting down doing nothing because I couldn`t breathe."

With the concentrator, she has a chance to live a fairly normal life. " I go to the store and the health center and the beauty shop and we go out to dinner and the movies. We do as much normal living as old people can do,"

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Donegan says.

Donegan rents her concentrator and portable oxygen tanks from Bach Medical Supply in Springfield.

Currently, Medicare covers 80 percent of the rental, which includes maintenance.

If the Deficit Reduction Act passes, that will change. Medicare would then only cover the cost of renting the concentrator for 36 months, then the patient would own equipment.

What is uncertain is the cost associated with maintaining the machines after the 36 months of benefits expire.

That's a big worry for Bach owner, Steve Bach. "If you consider that Medicare pays for the concentrator which needs to be maintained to it in good working order we have patients 70 miles away that's 140 miles and then manpower that is all major overhead. "

Bach says his company will not be able to just absorb the cost of maintenance. If Medicare stops picking up the tab, he may have to pass those costs on to the customer.

Bach estimates it costs about \$100 a month to maintain a concentrator. Many medical supply companies also provide 24-hour emergency crews for after-hours repairs. Patients who have to maintain their own equipment may not have that available in the future.

The Deficit Reduction Act goes back before the U.S. House February 1.

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