

THE MEDICARE LOW VISION REHABILITATION DEMONSTRATION

Background:

Congress has authorized the Secretary of Health and Human Services to carry out a nationwide outpatient vision rehabilitation services demonstration project.

“The purpose of this demonstration project is to examine the impact of standardized national coverage for vision rehabilitation services in the home by physicians, occupational therapists and certified rehabilitation teachers.”

Overview:

Medicare beneficiaries who are diagnosed with moderate to severe visual impairment may be eligible to receive covered vision rehabilitation services under a new demonstration project. Demonstration covered services will only be available to Medicare beneficiaries who live in one of the specified demonstration locales and must be prescribed by a qualified physician, such as an ophthalmologist or an optometrist who also practices in one of the specified demonstration locales.

Low Vision Rehabilitation Demonstration locales will include New Hampshire, New York City (all 5 boroughs), Atlanta, GA., North Carolina, Kansas, and Washington State. Eligible beneficiaries who live in these areas and receive their medical eye care from an ophthalmologist or optometrist who practices in these areas could be covered for up to 9 hours of rehabilitation services provided in an appropriate setting, including in the home.

For many with visual impairments, rehabilitation training can help them maintain their independence and quality of life. Rehabilitation can help prevent accidents, like falls and burns that often occur when someone cannot navigate well due to vision loss.

Coverage:

Under this Low Vision Rehabilitation Demonstration, Medicare will cover vision rehabilitation services for people with a diagnosis of moderate or severe vision impairment including blindness that is not correctable by conventional methods, such as glasses or surgery. Rehabilitation may be conducted under general supervision of a qualified physician in appropriate settings including in the home of the beneficiary receiving the services¹. Rehabilitation must be prescribed by a qualified physician and administered under an individualized, written plan of care developed by a qualified physician or qualified occupational therapist in private practice (OTPP). The plan of care must contain a specific diagnosis of visual impairment and must assure that vision rehabilitation services are medically necessary and the beneficiary receiving vision rehabilitation is capable of deriving benefit from the rehabilitation. Under the demonstration services will be covered when provided by a qualified occupational therapist, or by a low vision therapists, orientation and mobility specialist, or vision

¹ For the purposes of this demonstration CMS plans to waive the usual “incident to” rules in order to allow qualified occupational therapists who are not in private practice and certified low vision rehabilitation professionals to provide vision rehabilitation services under General Supervision of the physician.

rehabilitation therapists (aka rehabilitation teachers) who is certified by the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation Professionals (ACVREP).

Rehabilitation will be judged completed when the treatment goals have been attained and any subsequent services would be for maintenance of a level of functional ability, or when the patient has demonstrated no progress on two consecutive visits. All services covered under this demonstration are one-on-one, face-to-face services. Group services will not be covered.

Some areas of the country provide Medicare coverage for vision rehabilitation services under local coverage decisions (LCDs). LCDs allow Medicare to pay for vision rehabilitation when provided by qualified personnel, such as occupational therapists. LCDs may also allow coverage for vision rehabilitation when provided in the home by a qualified occupational therapist in private practice (OTPP) under general supervision. The Low Vision Rehabilitation Demonstration does not supersede LCDs whether services are provided in a demonstration locale, or not. Physicians and other providers who are not practicing in a designated demonstration locale may submit claims for vision rehabilitation as LCD covered therapy services, as before. Physicians and providers who are practicing in a designated demonstration locale may submit claims as either demonstration-related services or LCD covered therapy services, or both. However, in non-demonstration locales LCD will not cover services provided by orientation and mobility specialists, low vision therapists, or vision rehabilitation therapists and only OTPP can provide rehabilitation services in the home.

Eligibility:

To be eligible a beneficiary must;

- Participate in Medicare Part B fee-for-service coverage
- Have a medical diagnosis of moderate to severe visual impairment that cannot be corrected by glasses or surgery (i.e. cataracts)
- Have an individualized plan of care established by a physician or occupational therapist in private practice (OTPP)
- Be physically and mentally able to receive rehabilitation and derive benefit
- Live in one of the designated demonstration locales

Providers:

Eligible providers of services are;

- Qualified physicians, such as ophthalmologists or optometrists whose primary practice is in one of the demonstration locales
- Qualified occupational therapists

- Certified² low vision rehabilitation professionals including;
 - Low Vision therapists
 - Orientation and Mobility Specialists
 - Vision Rehabilitation Therapists (aka Rehabilitation Teachers)
- Qualified rehabilitation facilities, such as outpatient rehabilitation clinics, critical access hospitals.

Approved Places of Services:

Rehabilitation services can be provided in a physician's office or a rehabilitation clinic, or in the home and home environment of the person receiving the rehabilitation, whichever is most appropriate. Appropriate places of service must be identified in the individualized, written plan of care.

Limitations of Coverage:

Eligible beneficiaries are able to obtain up to 9-hours of covered vision rehabilitation services over a consecutive 90-day period, as prescribed in an individualized, written plan of care. Vision rehabilitation under the demonstration is not subject to Medicare therapy caps.

Locales:

Low Vision Rehabilitation Demonstration will be conducted in 6 locales from across the country. These include New Hampshire, New York City (all 5 boroughs), Atlanta, GA., North Carolina, Kansas, and Washington State.

Duration of the Demonstration:

The demonstration will begin April 3, 2006 and continue until March 31, 2011.

² Certification by the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP)