Special Needs Alliance:

Public Policy News You Can Use

May 12, 2026

Representatives Introduce Bill Establishing First National Hotline for Caregivers of Individuals with Developmental Disabilities

Representative Robert Mendez (D-NJ-08) introduced the Caregiver Access to Resources and Emotional Support (CARES) Hotline Act (H.R.8620) with the support of 5 Democratic co-sponsors. The bill aims to establish a hotline to connect caregivers of individuals with developmental disabilities with professionals who can provide emotional support, brief intervention, and mental health referrals. The bill would also require the federal government to create and maintain a national database of caregiver resources and other peer-to-peer counseling. Representative Mendez stated the bill was inspired by conversations about the unique challenges caregivers of individuals with developmental disabilities face with representatives at Whole Spectrum Autism, an autism advocacy organization based in New Jersey. The bill is not expected to successfully move through the legislature this term because Congress is predominantly focused on appropriations negotiations for the remainder of the current fiscal year and negotiations for the start of the next fiscal year in September.

FDA Expected to Finalize Ban on Use of Electrical Stimulation Devices on People with Developmental Disabilities

Earlier this month, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) indicated that a final rule that would ban the use of electrical stimulation devices to address behavioral and emotional problems in individuals with developmental disabilities. In 2020, the FDA finalized a ban on electrical stimulation devices due to evidence of psychological and physical risks including burns, tissue damage, worsening underlying symptoms, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. In 2021, the ban was overturned by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, ruling that the FDA had overstepped its authority. In response, Congress passed a law giving the FDA the authority to institute a ban. In May 2024, the FDA closed the public comment period for the newest Proposal to Ban Electrical Stimulation Devices for Self-injurious or Aggressive Behavior. The Judge Rotenberg Educational Center in Canton, Massachussetts is believed to be the only facility in the country currently utilizing electrical stimulation on children and adults with developmental disabilities and other behavioral and

emotional challenges. Advocates including the Arc's Director of Education and Family Policy Robyn Linscott are encouraging the administration to finalize the ban to protect people with disabilities from abuse. An administration spokesperson indicated that the final ban would be issued later this month.

HHS Aims to Reduce Psychiatric Prescribing

On May 4, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced a plan to reduce "psychiatric overprescribing" at a Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) Institute event on the topic. The HHS plan was accompanied by a Dear Colleague letter from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) that emphasized clearer guidance for clinicians on when and how to safely reduce or discontinue psychiatric medications. Taken together, this announcement outlines a shift toward minimizing the use of psychotropic medications while promoting alternatives such as therapy and other non-drug interventions. The action plan, will also include education and outreach, program and policy actions, and research-to-practice efforts. The Administration framed this initiative as a broader policy effort to rebalance mental health treatment with more individualized, evidence-informed care; however, many in the provider and patient-advocate communities have expressed concern about plans that could make it harder for patients to receive treatment and access medication.

CMS Overhauls Prior Authorization

Last week, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) shared that they have taken significant steps to overhaul the prior authorization process, announcing the expansion of electronic prior authorization as part of a broader Health Tech Ecosystem initiative. Building on an earlier pledge with major health plans, CMS is bringing hospitals, physician practices, electronic health record vendors, and digital health developers to the discussion. As of January 1, 2026, impacted payers were required to deliver prior authorization decisions within 72 hours for urgent requests and 7 calendar days for standard requests. Electronic prior authorization interfaces are set to go live in January 2027. CMS projects these combined changes will save approximately $15 billion over 10 years.

These reforms come in response to longstanding inefficiencies in the traditional prior authorization process, which has relied heavily on paper forms, fax machines, and phone calls that have cosy providers an estimated $34,000 and 700 hours per clinician annually. Early results from the initial health plan pledge show that 11% of prior authorizations were eliminated, representing 6.5 million fewer authorizations for patients. CMS is also proposing to extend electronic prior authorization to drugs, signaling that this effort is intended to drive broad, lasting change across the entire health care ecosystem.

FDA Solicits Input on Drug Repurposing Efforts

On Friday, May 8, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced plans to seek public input on drug repurposing efforts aimed at identifying new therapeutic uses for FDA-approved drugs, particularly for diseases and populations without existing treatment options. The FDA's repurposing efforts focus on drugs that meet three main criteria: (1) there is compelling scientific evidence supporting the drug's effectiveness for a new use; (2) the dosage form and route of administration for the new indication are the same as for an already approved use; and (3) the safety profile is expected to be comparable between the original and new patient populations. The agency is especially interested in input on disease areas including substance use disorders, metabolic diseases, neurodegenerative conditions, women's and men's health conditions, and rare diseases.

The FDA is seeking targeted input on priority chronic disease areas, potential drug repurposing candidates with varying levels of evidentiary support, methods for identifying promising candidates, and the key barriers and opportunities shaping drug repurposing efforts. This announcement is part of a broader federal effort to modernize FDA-approved drug labeling, ensuring that it reflects current scientific evidence and provides clinically meaningful information for providers and patients. Comments from interested parties are due 30 days after publication of the docket in the Federal Register, which is expected on May 12, 2026.

What's on Tap

Both chambers of Congress return this week and will be faced with a long legislative agenda. Despite Republicans' recent successful efforts to end a historic 76-day shutdown of most of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) remain unfunded for the current fiscal year. The Republican conference is expected to focus much of its legislative bandwidth on ICE and CBP funding, currently proposed at $72 billion through 2029. Last week, it was revealed that $1 billion of the ICE and CBP funding was allocated to the White House's project to remodel the East Wing into a presidential ballroom. The ballroom has drawn sharp criticism and is expected to complicate the passage of the budget resolution.

Also last week, the Virginia Supreme Court ruled to nullify the results of the state's special election wherein voters approved new congressional maps that aimed to enable Democrats to gain four additional sets in the U.S. House of Representatives. Late last year, the U.S. Supreme Court significantly weakened Voting Rights Act protections for minority communities in their ruling on Louisiana v. Callais. Following the ruling on Louisiana v. Callais, a slew of Republican state legislatures moved to enact further gerrymandered congressional maps that would disenfranchise minority voters who were more likely to vote for Democratic candidates to make it more likely that Republicans would be able to retain control of the House of Representatives in the next legislative session. Six states enacted new maps that would benefit Republicans, jeopardizing Democrats chances of taking back the House at the end of this year.

This week, the Senate Appropriations Committee is continuing to work through the annual budget process amid parallel efforts to produce a budget reconciliation package. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Commissioner Marty Makary will testify before the Senate Appropriations Committee on Wednesday, May 13 to discuss the President's budget request for fiscal year 2027. Last week, rumors circulated that President Trump was considering firing Commissioner Makary. Under Commissioner Makary, President Trump's base has distanced itself from the FDA's approaches to vaccines and the abortion medication mifepristone. Although reports of Commissioner Makary's firing remain speculative, they are indicative of a larger fracture among President Trump's base and within the Department of Health and Human Services.

Upcoming Events

Senate

- In Session: May 11-15
- Wednesday, May 13, 10:30 am | Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and related agencies hearing on the President's FY27 Budget Request for the FDA | 138 Dirksen Senate Office Building

House

- In Session: May 12-15