

A Patient's Guide to Advocating for Improved Access to Weight-Loss Surgery and Obesity Management Services in Wisconsin

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This guide was created by the Obesity Action Coalition in an effort to encourage those affected by obesity to advocate for improved access to the treatment of morbid obesity in the state of Wisconsin.

The Importance of Advocacy

Advocacy is defined as the act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, idea or policy. Advocacy comes in many forms. This guide will specifically highlight how to effectively work with elected and appointed officials as well as other members of government. For more information on other types of advocacy, request the Obesity Action Coalition's (OAC) publication, **"Your Voice Makes A Difference. A Guide On How You Can Help Fellow Patients Affected By Obesity."**

Elected and appointed United States officials at the local, state and federal level play a significant role in our society and healthcare. Often, the laws they create or administer directly influence our day-to-day lives or regulate the medical treatments we receive. However, the majority of elected and appointed officials know little about obesity, its effects and treatments. The OAC seeks to increase awareness among our elected officials by encouraging those affected by obesity to become advocates.

As an American, it is your right to build relationships with your elected officials and to advocate for positive change. It is through the voice of patients, family members and medical professionals that legislators and other officials learn how current, pending and future laws and regulations impact obese Americans.

The OAC encourages you to become an advocate for change.



Accessing Weight-Loss Surgery and Obesity Management Services in Wisconsin

Most healthcare plans, including the majority of the state employee plans, covering citizens of the state of Wisconsin exclude insurance coverage for bariatric surgery (weight-loss surgery) and obesity management services. The OAC believes that the exclusion of bariatric surgery and obesity management services negatively impacts the quality of health and life of the citizens of Wisconsin by denying them access to needed medical care. Morbid obesity is a complex disease that requires treatment. The medical treatment of morbid obesity (through surgery or medical weight management programs including physician-supervised weight-loss and medical nutrition therapy) decreases mortality, improves or resolves obesity-related illnesses and improves quality of life. Denying patients and their physicians proven options for treatment is an ill-advised, short-term economic decision by insurers in Wisconsin that endangers the long-term health of many of Wisconsin's citizens.

Call to Action

The OAC requests that you educate your state legislators, key state officials, health plan medical director and employer (through your benefits manager, human resources department and/or union representation) about the importance of insurance coverage for weight-loss surgery and obesity management services. This issue is very important. Everyday, we read about the impact obesity has on our society, and now it is time for those affected by obesity to come together and demand improved access to treatment in Wisconsin.

What Can You Do to Advocate?

Anyone can be an advocate. Here are a few suggestions on what you can do.

- Share this information with family, friends and support groups and encourage them to get involved. The more individuals involved, the stronger our voice. Feel free to make copies of this guide, call the OAC National Office at (800) 717-3117 for additional copies or you may download an electronic version to send via e-mail by visiting the OAC Web site at www.obesityaction.org.
- Write, e-mail, visit or call your legislators and other key officials listed in this guide.
- Let your employer and insurance plan know about the need for bariatric surgery and obesity management coverage by contacting your benefits manager, human resources department, union representation and/or health plan medical director.
- Keep the OAC informed of your actions. Did you write or e-mail your legislator? Did you post a link to this guide on your Online support group? Let us know by mailing or e-mailing us a copy of your letter or message.

Who Should I Send My Letters to?

*The OAC has targeted the following Wisconsin officials and legislators. Officials with an * should be targeted by those seeking to improve access for state employees. In addition, we encourage you to contact your district legislators. To find your local legislators, visit www.obesityaction.org*

Governor Jim Doyle
115 E. State Capitol
Madison, WI 53702
(608) 266-1212
(608) 267-8983 Fax
<http://www.wisgov.state.wi.us/contact.asp>

Kevin Hayden, Secretary
Department of Health and Family Services
1 W. Wilson Street, Room 650
Madison, WI 53702
(608) 266-1865
(608) 266-7882 Fax

Eric Stanchfield, Secretary*
Department of Employee Trust Funds
PO Box 7931
Madison, WI 53707-7931
(877) 533-5020 or
(608) 266-3285
(608) 267-4549 Fax
<https://prd4p.it.state.wi.us/etf/internet/ETFContaktUs.jsp>

Steve Frankel, Chairperson*
Group Insurance Board
C/o Board Liaison
Department of Employee Trust Funds
PO Box 7931
Madison, WI 53707-7931
(877) 533-5020 or
(608) 266-3285
(608) 267-4549 Fax
<https://prd4p.it.state.wi.us/etf/internet/ETFContaktUs.jsp>

Employee Trust Funds Board
c/o Board Liaison
Department of Employee Trust Funds
PO Box 7931
Madison, WI 53707-7931
(877) 533-5020 or
(608) 266-3285
(608) 267-4549 Fax
<https://prd4p.it.state.wi.us/etf/internet/ETFContaktUs.jsp>

Senator Dan Kapanke, Chairperson
Committee on Transportation, Tourism &
Insurance
PO Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707-7882
(608) 266-5490 or
(800) 385-3385
(608) 267-5173 Fax
sen.kapanke@legis.state.wi.us

Senator Carol Roessler, Chairperson*
Committee on Health, Children, Families and
Long-Term Care
PO Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707-7882
(608) 266-5300 or
(888) 736-8720
(608) 266-0423 Fax
sen.roessler@legis.state.wi.us

Office of the Commissioner of Insurance
125 South Webster Street
Madison, WI 53702
(608) 266-3585 or
(800) 236-8517
(608) 266-9935 Fax
information@oci.state.wi.us

Representative Leah Vukmir, Chairperson
Committee on Health and Healthcare Reform
Room 107
State Capitol
PO Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708
(608) 266-9108
(608) 282-3614 Fax
Rep.vukmir@legis.wisconsin.gov

Representative Frank Lasee, Chairperson
Committee on Insurance
Room 105 West
State Capitol
PO Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708
(608) 266-9870
(608) 282-3602 Fax
rep.lasee@legis.wisconsin.gov

Sean Dilweg, Commissioner

Looking for Tips on What to Write?

Below, please find some suggested topics, facts, do's, don'ts and a sample letter.

- If you are a post-bariatric surgery patient or have participated in an obesity management program, please share in your letter the difference your weight-loss has made in your life from both a quality of life and health standpoint. For instance, if you are no longer a diabetic, you now take a reduced number of medications and/or no longer suffer from sleep apnea. Your personal story is powerful.
- If you are a state of Wisconsin employee, please include this information.
- If you are a Medicaid recipient, please include this information.
- If you are seeking weight-loss surgery or obesity management, explain your personal preparation, what health complications you are currently experiencing, how they affect your quality of life and the burden placed on you by the exclusion of weight-loss surgery and obesity management services by Wisconsin insurers.
- If you are a family member or friend of a weight-loss surgery or obesity management patient, detail the difference weight-loss has made in your family member/friend's life or how much they would benefit from receiving these services.
- Publicly question why many Wisconsin insurers, including the state employee program, deny access to weight-loss surgery and obesity management services.

Facts about Obesity in Wisconsin

- More than 1,250,000 residents of Wisconsin are considered obese.
- Approximately 275,000 are morbidly obese (more than 100 pounds overweight).
- Individuals who are obese have a 50-100 percent increased risk of premature death from all causes, compared to individuals with a healthy weight.
- Nearly \$1.5 billion is spent annually on the medical expenses associated with obesity in Wisconsin.

Facts about Bariatric (Weight-Loss) Surgery

- Extends the lives of patients.
- Causes significant weight-loss.
- Decreases the incidence and costs of obesity-related diseases, such as diabetes (completely resolved in 76.8 percent of patients), hypertension (resolved in 61.7 percent of patients) and sleep apnea (resolved in 85.7 percent of patients).
- Improves the quality of life of the recipients.
- Medicare recently reviewed coverage and after extensive review, expanded access to bariatric surgery.
- For more facts, see the OAC publication, "*Fact Sheet: Why it makes sense to provide treatment for obesity through bariatric surgery.*"

Do's

- Write legibly and be brief and to the point. Short letters (one-page) are the most effective.
- Mention the exclusion of bariatric (weight-loss) surgery and obesity management services in Wisconsin.
- Give your reasons for opposing the exclusion of weight-loss surgery and other services.
- Be courteous and reasonable.
- Be sure to address the individual by the correct title.
- Include all of your contact information.
- Double check your information for accuracy.
- Use correct grammar and complete sentences.
- If typing your letter, remember to use a spell check feature.
- Include your personal story.
- Write a follow-up letter thanking the individual.

Don'ts

- Try not to be longwinded.
- Avoid a righteous tone.
- Avoid abbreviations.
- Refrain from apologizing for writing or taking valuable time.
- Do not threaten anyone.
- Try not to mention more than one issue per letter.
- Do not demand anything from the individual.
- Avoid form letters.
- Do not refer or allude to politics as sleazy or dishonorable.

Sample Letter

Below, please find a sample letter that will help you get started:

Your Full Name

Your Full Address

Your City, State and Zip

Your Phone Number with Area Code

Current Date

The Honorable (Insert Legislator or Public Official Name Here)

Legislator or Official's Address

Legislator or Official's City, State, Zip

Dear Title (Governor, Senator, Representative, Commissioner, etc.),

In your first paragraph, mention the following points:

1. You are writing to request their assistance in improving access to bariatric (weight-loss) surgery and obesity management services. If writing specifically about state-employee program, mention it here.
2. Discuss how this specific issue affects you and your family.

In your second and third paragraphs, mention the following items:

1. Further elaborate how the issue affects or has affected you.
2. Share your personal connection with the issue in question. (Remember to remain brief. A short letter can accomplish just as much as a long one.)

In your last paragraph, discuss the following closing items:

1. Urge them to help improve access to obesity management services.
2. Request that the individual write you back, informing you on their position regarding the issue.
3. Thank the individual.

Sincerely,

Your Full Name