

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

created by:



4511 North Himes Ave., Suite 250
Tampa, FL 33614
(800) 717-3117

www.obesityaction.org

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 South Carolina.

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 working with legislators and government officials. 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 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 Americans.

The OAC encourages you to become an advocate for change.



Accessing Weight-Loss Surgery and Other Obesity Management Services in South Carolina

Most healthcare insurers, including the self-insured state employee plan, covering citizens of the state of South Carolina exclude insurance coverage for bariatric surgery (weight-loss surgery) and other obesity management services. In addition, South Carolina's Medicaid program includes coverage but does so at very low reimbursement rate, making it difficult to find a surgeon willing to perform the procedure. The OAC believes that the exclusion of bariatric surgery, obesity management services and Medicaid's low reimbursement rate negatively impacts the quality of health and life of the citizens of South Carolina 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 other medical weight management programs) 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 South Carolina that endangers the long-term health of many South Carolinians.

Call to Action

The OAC requests that you educate your state legislators as well as the other key state officials, listed below, about the importance of insurance coverage for weight-loss surgery. 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 South Carolina.

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 know about the need for bariatric surgery and obesity management coverage through your human resources department and/or union representation.
- 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 South Carolina officials and legislators. In addition, we encourage you to contact your district representatives. To find your representatives, visit www.obesityaction.org

Governor Mark Sanford
Office of the Governor
PO Box 12267
Columbia, SC 29211
Telephone: (830) 734-2100
governor@govoepp.state.sc.us

Senator Scott Richardson
Director of Insurance
South Carolina Department of Insurance
610 Gressette Building
Columbia, SC 29202
Telephone: (803) 212-6040
Fax: (803) 212-6043

Senator David L. Thomas
Chairman, Banking and Insurance Committee
410 Gressette Building
Columbia, SC 29202
Telephone: (830) 212-6240
SBI@scsenate.org

Representative Kenneth A. Bingham
Chairman, Insurance Subcommittee
530D Blatt Building
Columbia, SC 29211
Telephone: (803) 734-2988
KAB@scstatehouse.net

To comment on state employee coverage, we suggest writing (in addition to Governor Sanford listed above) the following members of the State Budget and Control Board:

Thomas Ravenel
State Treasurer
PO Box 11778
Columbia, SC 29211
Telephone: (830) 734-2016
Treasurer@sto.state.sc.us

Richard Eckstrom
Comptroller General
1200 Senate Street
305 Wade Hampton Office Building
Columbia, SC 29201
Telephone: (830) 734-2588

cgoffice@cg.state.sc.us

Senator Hugh K. Leatherman, Sr.

111 Gressette Building

Columbia, SC 29202

Telephone: (830) 212-6640

SFI@scsenate.org

To comment on Medicaid coverage, we suggest writing (in addition to Governor Sanford listed above):

Robert M. Kerr

Director

Department of Health and Human Services

PO Box 8206

Columbia, SC 29202-8206

Telephone: (830) 898-2500

info@dhhs.state.sc.us

Looking for Tips on What to Write?

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

- If you are a post-bariatric surgery patient or have lost weight through other obesity management services, 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 received or are planning your surgery under South Carolina's Medicaid program, please include this information. If you are no longer a Medicaid patient after successful surgery or another weight-loss program, please include this information as well.
- If you are seeking weight-loss surgery or other obesity management services, detail why, what health complications you are currently experiencing and how they affect your quality of life.
- If you are a family member or friend of a weight-loss surgery or obesity management services 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 South Carolina insurers deny access to weight-loss surgery and other obesity management services.

Facts about Obesity in South Carolina

- More than 1 million residents of South Carolina are considered obese.
- Approximately 200,000 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.
- More than 25.1 percent of the South Carolina population (who are obese) accounted for \$1.06 billion in medical costs related to their obesity.

Facts about Bariatric (Weight-Loss) Surgery and Obesity Management Services

- 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 other obesity management services and/or the low Medicaid reimbursement rates in South Carolina.
- 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 other obesity management services in the state of South Carolina. If writing specifically about state-employee program or Medicaid, 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 restore 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