

A Patient's Guide to Advocating for Improved Access to Weight-Loss Surgery with Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield of New Jersey

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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 under Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield of New Jersey health plans.

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 insurance executives. 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 under Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield of New Jersey

Recently changes were implemented by Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield of New Jersey that limit access to weight-loss surgery. The guidelines specifically limit access to weight-loss surgery for those with a body mass index (BMI) of between 35 and 60. This change eliminates coverage for those who have a BMI of greater than 60.

The OAC believes these changes are ultimately detrimental to the health and quality of life of members of Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield of New Jersey health plans.

Call to Action

The OAC requests that you share your dismay with the Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield of New Jersey Executives, educate your elected state legislators as well as the other key state officials, listed below, about the negative impact these new rules will have. 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.

The Issues In Detail

Specifically, the OAC is concerned about:

1. The variation from the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) 1991 Consensus Conference on Obesity Guidelines, which are universally accepted as the standard criteria to access bariatric surgery.
2. The determination by the health plan that surgery is experimental for those with a BMI of greater than 60.
3. The requirement of a five year documented medical record history of morbid obesity.
4. The requirement of six consecutive months of medical supervised weight loss.
5. The difficulty in accessing medically necessary revision surgery.

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.
- Write the Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield of New Jersey Health Plan Executives.
- 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 New Jersey officials and legislators. In addition, we encourage you to contact your district representatives. To find your local representatives, visit

www.obesityaction.org:

Governor Jon Corzine

Office of the Governor

P.O. Box 001

Trenton, NJ 08625

Phone: (609) 292-6000

<http://www.state.nj.us/governor/govmail.html>

Fred M. Jacobs, MD, JD

Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Health
and Senior Services

John Fitch Plaza

P.O. Box 360

Trenton, NJ 08625

Phone: (609) 292-7837

Fax (609) 292-0053

Fred.jacobs@doh.state.nj.us

Steven M. Goldman

Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Banking
and Insurance

P.O. Box 325

Trenton, NJ 08625-0325

Phone: (609) 633-7667

Commissioner@dobi.state.nj.us

Senator Joseph F. Vitale

Chairman, Health, Human Services, and Senior
Citizens Committee

87 Main St.

Woodbridge, NJ 07095

Phone: (732) 855-7441

<http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/RepEmail.asp>

Senator Nia H. Gill

Chairperson, Committee on Commerce
425 Bloomfield Avenue
2nd Floor
Montclair, NJ 07042
Phone: (973) 509-0388
<http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/RepEmail.asp>

Assemblyman Herb Conaway, MD

Chairman, Health and Senior Services Committee
Delran Professional Center
8008 Route 130 North
Suite 125
Delran, NJ 08075
Phone: (856) 461-3997
<http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/RepEmail.asp>

Assemblyman Neil M. Cohen

Chairman, Financial Institutions and Insurance
Committee
985 Stuyvesant Ave.
Union, NJ 07083
Phone: (908) 624-0880
<http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/RepEmail.asp>

The OAC has targeted the following Horizon Representatives to make aware of your disagreement with the limitations for bariatric surgery:

William J. Marino

President and Chief Executive Officer
Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield of New Jersey
Three Penn Plaza East
Newark, NJ 07105

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 Horizon employee, 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 requirements being implemented by Horizon.
- 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 Horizon is restricting access to weight-loss surgery.

Facts about Obesity in New Jersey

- Nearly 22 percent of the residents of New Jersey are considered obese.
- Approximately 5 percent 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 \$2.2 billion is spent annually on the medical expenses associated with obesity in New Jersey.

Facts about Bariatric (Weight-Loss) Surgery

- Extends the lives of patients.
- 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).
- Causes significant weight-loss.
- 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 revised Horizon policies.
- Give your reasons for opposing the new policies.
- 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 criticize other obesity surgeries or treatment options.
- 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 to explain the challenges of Horizon's new policies.
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