Protecting Air Ambulance Services for Americans Act

Senators Michael Bennet (D-Colo.) and Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.)

Air ambulance services are critical for severely ill or injured patients that need immediate access to emergency health care. Because they can travel faster and cover larger areas than land ambulances, air ambulances are an essential service to administer lifesaving health care in rural communities in Colorado and across the country. Air ambulances can be the difference between life and death – a 2019 study found injured patients transported by air ambulance were less likely to die than those taken by ground ambulance.

Medicare beneficiaries account for nearly 40% of all air medical transports. While operational costs of air ambulance services have increased, the rate of Medicare reimbursements have not. A 2017 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that Medicare reimbursement rates for air ambulance services are significantly below the costs of providing care, especially in rural areas.

The Medicare reimbursement rate for emergency air services was last updated in 2002 and has not kept pace with inflation. Since then, over 35 air ambulance bases have closed, and more closures are expected – which would particularly affect rural communities. To ensure seniors, Americans living in rural areas, and patients in need of emergency care have access to air medical services, this legislation updates the Medicare fee schedule for these critical services.

Specifically, the Protecting Air Ambulance Services for Americans Act would:
- Authorize data collected under the *No Surprises Act* to be used to update Medicare reimbursement rates for air ambulance services;
- Require data collection of operating costs, utilization of services by Medicare beneficiaries, and Medicare revenue received from air providers every three years; and,
- Require the GAO to conduct a study on the collected data and to provide recommendations to improve the emergency air services fee schedule.