

May 11, 2026

Paul Markovich  
Chief Executive Officer and President  
Ascendiun  
601 12<sup>th</sup> Street  
Oakland, CA 94607

Dear Mr. Markovich:

The 89 undersigned organizations, representing millions of patients with serious health care conditions and the health providers who care for them, are writing to ask how you have kept the promise you made to Congressman Troy Carter (D-LA) during your Congressional testimony on January 22, 2026 to work to address problems caused by insurance-mandated step therapy.

As you are likely aware, insurance-mandated step-therapy, or “fail first” policies, prioritize short-term cost-savings over the life-saving clinical judgment of medical professionals. We applaud your presence at the hearing and are eager to hear what specific actions Ascendiun has taken to support the pledge made to Congress and the American people to address the harms caused by step therapy and improve patient health. If the promised solutions have yet to be implemented, please provide the date by which you plan to enact them.

Step therapy mandates that patients “fail” on one or more insurer-preferred medications before being granted access to the treatment their doctor originally prescribed. For patients living with chronic, progressive, and life-threatening conditions—such as autoimmune diseases, digestive diseases, cancer, neurologic and mental health disorders—these delays are not merely administrative; they are medically hazardous. Far too often, step therapy protocols cause dangerous delays in access to appropriate care and can lead to irreversible disease progression, surgery, a significant decrease in quality

of life, and increased healthcare expenditures.<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6</sup> We have seen firsthand how these “fail first” policies prioritize short-term cost savings over long-term patient health.

As a reminder, the following are some of our coalition’s critical concerns with your current step therapy protocols:

- **Clinical Degradation:** Forcing patients onto treatments not prescribed by their clinician oftentimes allows for disease progression that is irreversible. In many cases, by the time a patient is permitted to "step up" to the prescribed medication, their condition has worsened to the point of requiring surgery or hospitalization. These step requirements frequently contradict current established medical guidelines for patient care.<sup>7</sup>
- **The Provider-Patient Relationship:** These protocols undermine the expertise of physicians who understand their patients' unique medical histories. When an insurer overrides a specialist’s prescription, it erodes trust and delays care.
- **Economic Inefficiency:** While step therapy aims to reduce drug spending, it frequently leads to higher overall healthcare costs through increased emergency room visits, negative health outcomes, and lost workplace productivity.
- **Alignment with Federal Momentum:** With the growing bipartisan support for the **Safe Step Act (H.R. 5509/S. 2903)**, and increasing scrutiny from public payors, the healthcare landscape is shifting toward mandatory exceptions and transparent oversight. *We urge Ascendium to lead the health insurance industry and follow through on your promise to Congressman Troy Carter by adopting these measures.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Farley JF, Cline RR, Schommer JC, et al. Retrospective assessment of Medicaid step-therapy prior authorization policy for atypical antipsychotic medications. Clin Ther. 2008;30(8):1524-1539. DOI: [10.1016/j.clinthera.2008.08.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clinthera.2008.08.009)

<sup>2</sup> Panzer PE, Regan TS, Chiao E, Sarnes ME. Implications of an SSRI generic step therapy pharmacy benefit design: An economic model in anxiety disorders. Am J Manag Care. 2005;11(12 Suppl):S370-S3709. PMID: [16236019](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16236019/)

<sup>3</sup> Murawski MM, Abdelgawad T. Exploration of the impact of preferred drug lists on hospital and physician visits and the costs to Medicaid. Am J Manag Care. 2005;11:SP35-42. PMID: [15700908](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15700908/)

<sup>4</sup> Mark TL, Gibson TM, McGuigan K, Chu BC. The effects of antidepressant step therapy protocols on pharmaceutical and medical utilization and expenditures. Am J Psychiatry. 2010;167(10):1202-1209. DOI: [10.1176/appi.ajp.2010.09060877](https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2010.09060877)

<sup>5</sup> Richards MA, Westcombe AM, Love SB, et al. Influence of delay on survival in patients with breast cancer: A systematic review. Lancet. 1999;353(9159):1119-1126. DOI: [10.1016/s0140-6736\(99\)02143-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(99)02143-1).

<sup>6</sup> Constant BD, de Zoeten EF, Stahl MG, et al. Delays related to prior authorization in inflammatory bowel disease. Pediatrics. 2022;149(3):e2021052501. DOI: [10.1542/peds.2021-052501](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-052501).

<sup>7</sup> Lenahan KL, Nichols DE, Gertler RM, Chambers JD. Variation in use and content of prescription drug step therapy protocols, within and across health plans. Health Aff. 2021;40(11):1749-1757. DOI: [10.1377/hlthaff.2021.00822](https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2021.00822)

The Safe Step Coalition endorses the streamlined, medically sound exception processes for step-therapy protocols contained in the Safe Step Act (H.R. 5509/ S. 2903). The first step towards Ascendium becoming a true leader in patient-centered care was your public pledge before Congress. The next step is to ensure that the right treatment reaches the right patient without unnecessary delay.

We look forward to your response. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Liz Siembida with the National Psoriasis Foundation, at [lsiembida@psoriasis.org](mailto:lsiembida@psoriasis.org) or Hayley Dempsey with the Arthritis Foundation, at [hdempsey@arthritis.org](mailto:hdempsey@arthritis.org). Thank you again for taking the first critical step in providing patient-centered care, and we look forward to working together to improve patient outcomes.

Sincerely,

ADAP Advocacy Association  
AiArthritis  
Aimed Alliance  
Alliance for Aging Research  
Alliance for Headache Disorders Advocacy  
Alliance for Patient Access  
Alliance of Specialty Medicine  
Alpha-1 Foundation  
ALS Association  
American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, & Immunology  
American Academy of Dermatology Association  
American Academy of Neurology  
American Association of Neurological Surgeons  
American Association of Orthopaedic Surgeons  
American College of Gastroenterology  
American Gastroenterological Association  
American Partnership for Eosinophilic Disorders  
American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition  
American Society of Consultant Pharmacists (ASCP)  
American Urological Association  
Appalachian Learning Initiative  
Arthritis Foundation  
Association of Gastrointestinal Motility Disorders (AGMD)  
Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America  
Autoimmune Association  
Cancer Support Community  
CancerCare  
Caregiver Action Network  
Coalition of Skin Diseases

Coalition of State Rheumatology Organizations  
Coalition of Wisconsin Aging and Health Groups  
Community Access National Network  
Community Liver Alliance  
Congress of Neurological Surgeons  
Crohn's & Colitis Foundation  
Cure SMA  
CURED Nfp  
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance  
Dia de la Mujer Latina, Inc.  
Digestive Disease National Coalition  
Epilepsy Foundation of America  
Foundation for Sarcoidosis Research  
Gastroparesis: Fighting for Change  
Girls with Guts  
GO2 for Lung Cancer  
HD Reach  
Hemophilia Federation of America  
IBDMoms  
ICAN, International Cancer Advocacy Network  
Infusion Access Foundation  
International Myeloma Foundation  
International Pain Foundation  
ITSAN  
LUGPA  
LUNGeivity Foundation  
Lupus and Allied Diseases Association, Inc.  
Lupus Foundation of America  
Metro Maryland Ostomy Association, Inc.  
Movement Disorders Policy Coalition  
Multiple Sclerosis Foundation  
National Alliance of State Prostate Cancer Coalitions  
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)  
National Bleeding Disorders Foundation  
National Headache Foundation  
National Infusion Center Association  
National Kidney Foundation  
National Organization of Rheumatology Management  
National Patient Advocate Foundation  
National Psoriasis Foundation  
Nebraska Pharmacists Association  
Nevada Chronic Care Collaborative  
North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition  
Oklahoma Society of Clinical Oncology, Inc.

Organization for Latino Health Advocacy  
Peggy Lillis Foundation for C. diff Education and Advocacy  
PlusInc  
PMD Alliance  
Pulmonary Hypertension Association  
Society of Dermatology Physician Associates  
Spondylitis Association of America  
The Coalition for Hemophilia B  
The Headache and Migraine Policy Forum  
The Matrix Consulting, LLC  
The STARR Coalition  
The Sturge-Weber Foundation  
Tourette Association of America  
TSC Alliance  
United Ostomy Associations of America, Inc.  
U.S. Pain Foundation