In a key action to increase access to medication assisted treatment for persons addicted to opioid drugs, this week the Department of Health and Human Services released a final regulation to allow physicians to increase from 100 to 275 the number of patients for whom they can prescribe buprenorphine. Buprenorphine is one of three FDA-approved medications to treat addiction. It is addictive and can be abused. Sometimes it is combined with naloxone, sold under the brand name Suboxone, to decrease its euphoric properties. Buprenorphine is covered by state Medicaid programs, although certain restrictions and time limits may exist in some states.

DHHS has also proposed rules to eliminate questions on pain management from the survey that sets hospital payment scoring calculation. In the DHHS press release, they say some clinicians report feeling pressure to overprescribe opioids because the survey including the pain management questions is tied to Medicare payments to hospitals.

The third major action will require prescribers and dispensers in the Indian Health Services system to check state prescription drug monitoring program (PDMP) databases before prescribing or dispensing any opioid drug for more than a seven day period. The IHS will provide training to hundreds of Bureau of Indian Affairs law enforcement officers on how to use naloxone to reverse a drug overdose and provide naloxone kits to law enforcement.

The Senate and House have both passed bills to address the opioid epidemic. Reconciliation has begun. The Obama budget for next year calls for an additional $1.1 billion to increase treatment although the likelihood of adoption of this funding is uncertain.