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DATE: December 18, 2025

TO: All Prescription Drug Plans, Medicare Advantage-Prescription Drug Plans, Section 1876 Cost Plans, and PACE Organizations

FROM: Vanessa S. Duran, Director
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SUBJECT: CY 2026 Formulary Information

This memorandum addresses key technical questions regarding the process for submitting formulary updates for contract year (CY) 2026, including formulary submission windows, information on Formulary Reference File (FRF) updates, line-level decision dates, plan deadlines to accept or reject CMS line-level decisions, and formulary approval deadlines. An updated CY 2026 FRF and FRF Change Report will be available in the Health Plan Management System (HPMS) on or about December 19, 2025. The Negative Formulary Change Request (NCR) Module and Prior Authorization/Step Therapy (PA/ST) Criteria Change Requests are now available in HPMS.

CY 2026 Formulary Update Process

Q1: When are the formulary submission windows for CY 2026 formulary updates?

A1: The CY 2026 formulary submission windows are listed below. The submission window begins at 12:00 a.m. ET on the opening date and closes at 11:59 p.m. PT on the closing date. Any formulary submission that is not successfully uploaded and validated prior to the submission deadline will not be accepted. As a reminder, the current CY 2026 FRF and FRF Change Report are will be available to download on or about December 19, 2025. While these files may be updated throughout the month as new drugs become available, we anticipate that the majority of FRF changes will be reflected on the FRF within five business days prior to the monthly formulary submission window.

CY 2026 Formulary Submission Windows:

- January 2-6, 2026
- February 2-4, 2026
- March 2-4, 2026
- April 1-3, 2026

- May 1-5, 2026
- June 1-3, 2026
- July 1-6, 2026
- August 3-5, 2026
- September 1-3, 2026
- October 1-5, 2026
- November 2-4, 2026

Any difficulties encountered upon upload or validation of your formulary should be brought to the attention of CMS and/or the HPMS Help Desk prior to the window closing. For technical submission issues in HPMS, contact the HPMS Help Desk at (800) 220-2028 or hpms@cms.hhs.gov. For other formulary related questions, please contact CMS at PartDFormularies@cms.hhs.gov. No consideration will be given for late submissions due to technical difficulties unless HPMS assistance was sought with ample time to troubleshoot issues before the deadline.

Q2: Will CMS utilize the line-level review process for CY 2026 formulary updates?

A2: Yes. Part D sponsors will submit partial formulary update files and CMS will perform line-level reviews of these updates. Changes are reviewed at the individual RxCUI level. Sponsors are expected to perform quality assurance checks to ensure their initial monthly formulary submission is accurate. If a sponsor submits a partial formulary update file that is fully acceptable, there is no need for the line-level resubmission process; as such, the sponsor will not receive communication notifying them of the need to complete this process. Plan sponsors will need to access the Line-Level Accept/Reject page in HPMS for partial formulary update file submissions that are considered only partially acceptable. Upon Part D sponsors' acceptance of our line-level decisions, HPMS will create a new version of the formulary containing only the allowable changes. If a sponsor fails to accept the CMS line-level review decisions, the entire formulary will be denied, and the formulary will revert to the most recently approved version in HPMS (i.e., it will not contain any of the CMS-approved line-level changes submitted). The table below details the dates for CMS' review of line-level changes, the corresponding dates that Part D sponsors must act on the review, and the formulary approval deadlines. Formulary files that contain a significant number of non-allowable changes will be denied and your organization may receive a compliance action.

Line-Level Decisions Available to Plans	Plan Deadline to Accept/Reject CMS Line-Level Decisions	Formulary Approval Deadline
January 14, 2026	January 15, 2026	January 20, 2026
February 12, 2026	February 13, 2026	February 18, 2026
March 18, 2026	March 19, 2026	March 24, 2026
April 15, 2026	April 16, 2026	April 21, 2026
May 15, 2026	May 18, 2026	May 21, 2026
June 15, 2026	June 16, 2026	June 23, 2026

Line-Level Decisions Available to Plans	Plan Deadline to Accept/Reject CMS Line-Level Decisions	Formulary Approval Deadline
July 15, 2026	July 16, 2026	July 21, 2026
August 13, 2026	August 14, 2026	August 20, 2026
September 16, 2026	September 17, 2026	September 22, 2026
October 14, 2026	October 15, 2026	October 20, 2026
November 13, 2026	November 16, 2026	November 20, 2026

Q3: When should new drugs within the protected classes be added to the HPMS formulary file?

A3: New drugs within the protected classes must be added to the formulary by the end of the 90-day expedited review period. If this timeframe does not exactly coincide with an HPMS formulary submission, the drug must be included on the HPMS formulary file during the next available submission window. For example, if a new drug within the protected classes is available on the market on May 15, 2026, the P&T committee must review the drug and add it to the formulary for adjudication by August 13, 2026 (falling beyond the formulary submission window for August 2026). The drug must then be added by plan sponsors to the HPMS formulary file during the September 1-3, 2026 submission window. Plans that fail to add a protected class drug or add a protected class drug with non-allowable tier placement or UM will have a one-time opportunity to resubmit their formulary to add or update the drug to an allowable tier or UM to avoid formulary denial, prior to the formulary approval deadline. CMS will notify plans of any other non-allowable changes via the Line-Level Accept/Reject page in HPMS and will send email notifications with instructions if protected class drugs are missing or if they are added to the formulary with a non-allowable tier placement or UM. We remind sponsors to check the FRF change report for deletions of protected class drugs that could necessitate addition of an equivalent product.

Q4: What types of changes can be made to the HPMS formulary files?

A4: Updated HPMS formulary files may only include the following:

- Allowable enhancements, as outlined in Appendix A
- Immediate substitutions, consistent with 42 C.F.R § 423.120(e)(2)(i)
- Immediate substitutions of selected drugs, consistent with section 1860D-4(b)(3)(I)(ii) of the Social Security Act and section 90 of the [Final CY 2026 Part D Redesign Program Instructions](#) issued on April 7, 2025.
- CMS-approved maintenance and non-maintenance negative formulary changes as defined in 42 C.F.R. § 423.100

Formulary enhancements, such as adding a Part D drug to the formulary, may be implemented at any time. Consistent with 42 C.F.R. § 423.120(f)(5), the enhancements must be included in the Part D sponsor's communication materials. The formulary enhancements must then be reflected in the next available HPMS formulary submission. In addition, sponsors are encouraged to directly notify beneficiaries of formulary additions in a timely manner since in some cases, such as a new generic or biosimilar biological product, an earlier conversion could lead to better value for the beneficiary and reduced program costs. Negative Formulary Change Requests (NCRs) must be submitted through the HPMS NCR Submission Module at least 30 days prior to the effective date. NCRs can be submitted via the HPMS NCR Module now through October 1, 2026. Sponsors do not need to submit an NCR for immediate substitutions that meet the requirements of 42 C.F.R. § 423.120(e)(2).

Please refer to 42 C.F.R. § 423.120(e) and (f) for additional requirements related to negative formulary changes. CMS-approved negative changes for the current contract year should be reflected in the formulary file update submitted in the month preceding the proposed NCR effective date. Once an NCR is approved, the negative change should be reflected in the next available partial formulary file update. We remind sponsors that the earliest effective date to implement approved negative formulary changes is March 1, 2026. Only approved negative changes may be marketed and implemented.

Negative changes that are submitted but have not received approval from CMS will be denied via the line-level review process. Non-allowable changes may not be implemented, posted on the organization's website, or otherwise communicated to enrollees and other specified entities. See Appendix A for more information on negative formulary changes and non-allowable changes.

Q5: Are Part D sponsors permitted to make changes to their existing prior authorization (PA) or step therapy (ST) criteria?

A5: Yes, but only in limited circumstances. Generally, a sponsor should not need to make significant revisions to its approved criteria during the contract year. As per 42 C.F.R. § 423.120(b)(1)(x), submitted UM criteria should already have been evaluated for clinical accuracy by the P&T committee prior to submission of the formulary to CMS. It is our expectation that Part D sponsors will not need to update criteria except under extraordinary circumstances, such as when new drug safety-related information becomes available during the contract year (e.g., a new boxed warning). If a new indication is approved by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) midyear and the drug is currently on formulary with PA, plans can revise their PA criteria to add clinical requirements for the new FDA-approved indication. These revisions can be made within 180 days of release of the new FDA-approved indication. Until any revisions are submitted by plans and approved by CMS, it is our expectation that the new indication is covered without any other clinical requirements, with the exception of indication-based formulary design. Revisions should be limited in scope as opposed to a significant rewrite of existing criteria. Part D sponsors are expected to perform all necessary quality assurance checks on formulary files prior to HPMS submission. As a result, criteria changes to correct spelling or grammatical errors, for example, will not be accepted.

As detailed below, plan sponsors are required to submit a request to CMS and receive approval of the request before making changes to existing PA or ST criteria. However, if the change is purely an enhancement – for example, the removal of required clinical information – the enhancement can be implemented prior to submission to CMS.

Q6: How do Part D sponsors submit changes to existing PA or ST criteria?

A6: When there is a need to change existing PA or ST criteria, sponsors will submit the gate opening request via HPMS. The file layout mirrors the UM Criteria Change Request template used in prior contract years but will be uploaded into HPMS as a tab-delimited (.txt) file. The process is described in the CY 2026 HPMS Formulary Submission Module and Reports Technical Manual, pages 114 – 115 “Submit or Withdraw PA/ST Criteria Change Request File Submission.” The upload file layout is described on page 151 of the technical manual.

You may begin submitting your requests the first business day after the monthly formulary submission window closes. Please ensure that all requests are submitted no later than three business days prior to the monthly formulary gate opening date to ensure PA and ST gates are opened. Once your request is submitted, the Formulary Contacts will receive an email from HPMS to notify you if your submission was successfully validated or rejected by validation. If the file is rejected by validation, the email will contain information regarding the validation error. Sponsors should work to fix the validation issue and resubmit an updated file. Once the file is successfully validated, sponsors will submit the monthly formulary update partial file during the regularly scheduled formulary submission window, along with the updated ST and/or PA criteria partial files.

Q7: How do sponsors withdraw or check the status of their PA/ST criteria change requests?

A7: Sponsors can withdraw PA/ST criteria change requests submitted during the latest request window via HPMS. This process is described in the CY 2026 HPMS Formulary Submission Module and Reports Technical Manual pages 115 – 116 “Withdraw PA/ST Criteria Change Request.”

Sponsors can check the status of the PA/ST Criteria Change Request file in HPMS via the Formulary PA/ST Criteria Change Request Status History Report. Instructions for accessing this report can be found in the 2026 HPMS Formulary Submission Module and Reports Technical Manual pages 117 – 118. This report indicates which PA/ST gates have been requested for opening at the next formulary update window, along with any requests which failed to validate.

Q8: How do sponsors check the review status at the group description or criteria element level for PA and ST?

A8: The HPMS UMGD Status Report should be used to determine the status of each PA and

ST group description. Instructions for accessing this report can be found in the 2026 HPMS Formulary Submission Module and Reports Technical Manual, pages 123 – 124. This report indicates the status (denied, in progress, not started, and approved) of each PA or ST group description.

The HPMS UMGD Review Detail Report should be used to determine criteria level status information. Instructions for accessing this report can be found in the 2026 HPMS Formulary Submission Module and Reports Technical Manual, pages 121 – 122. This report indicates the review status (not started, in progress, denied, approved, response requested, and response received) of each criteria element contained in a PA/ST group description.

Plans will not receive email notifications confirming criteria approvals during the annual PA and ST review cycle since the information is available in the UMGD Review Detail Report.

Q9: How will CMS review revised and newly submitted UM criteria?

A9: After criteria have been submitted via HPMS, they will be reviewed for clinical appropriateness. Based on this review, sponsors may be required to update their files. Due to short review timeframes, and because beneficiaries and prescribers need access to accurate information, sponsors will be allotted a limited number of opportunities to revise their criteria based on CMS feedback. Criteria elements that remain unacceptable will revert to the previously approved criteria or be removed, in the absence of extraordinary circumstances.

Q10: What is the process for submitting supplemental formulary files (Free First Fill and Home Infusion) with each formulary upload?

A10: During the monthly update windows, sponsors must indicate in HPMS when submitting their formulary files whether they will be using the previously uploaded versions of their supplemental files or if they will be uploading a new file(s). Sponsors must submit a new version of the file(s) only if there are changes in the list of drugs that have supplemental coverage. If there are no changes, sponsors must indicate that they are using their previous file(s).

For those formularies that are associated with Free First Fill and Home Infusion files, plan sponsors also need to indicate whether changes are required to the Supplemental File(s) when they accept CMS review decisions via the line-level process. If a plan sponsor indicates that no changes are required, the system will continue to use the previously uploaded supplemental file. Please note that if a drug is removed from the formulary file that is also on a supplemental file, HPMS will expect a new supplemental file submission. If a plan sponsor indicates that changes are required, the user will be prompted via email to upload new files. Once you indicate that you plan to upload a new file, the system is unable to use a previously uploaded version. Once you upload a new file, please verify in HPMS that the new supplemental file goes into desk review,

indicating that the file has been accepted. New supplemental files must be uploaded by 11:59 p.m. PT on the same day as the formulary resubmission line-level closing date. Failure to upload the required supplemental files may result in a compliance action.

Q11: Can sponsors implementing Indication-Based Formulary Design (IBFD) for CY 2026 update their Indication-Based Coverage (IBC) file during the plan year?

A11: We do not expect to see changes to the IBC files except in the case of a drug that receives a new indication or a newly approved drug being added to your formulary. If you need to add additional indications to your IBC file for one of the reasons previously listed, you should request the IBC file gate to be opened. You can then add the additional covered indications to your IBC file during the next monthly formulary update window. If PA criteria also need to be revised to accommodate the additional formulary indications, sponsors should request the PA gate opening as described in Q6. CMS does not expect formulary indications to be removed from the IBC file midyear, as this would be considered a negative change. To request the IBC file gate opening, sponsors should email PartDformularies@cms.hhs.gov. Please note that the Indication Reference File (IRF) may be updated periodically as needed for new indications that do not already exist on this file. Please check in HPMS for the most recent version of the IRF.

Q12: Are there requirements for Part D sponsors that are specific to selected drugs for the monthly formulary update windows in CY 2026?

A12: Yes, Part D sponsors should be aware of the following requirements with respect to selected drug changes during monthly update windows:

Selected Drug Additions to the FRFs: Part D sponsors must include on their monthly formulary submission any selected drug RxCUIs newly added to the FRF. Plans that fail to add a new RxCUI for a selected drug will be required to resubmit their formulary with the new RxCUI. Part D sponsors will have a one-time opportunity to add the missing RxCUI. Failure to add the RxCUI during the one-time opportunity to do so would result in both a compliance action and formulary denial.

Immediate Substitution Authority: As stated in the Final CY 2026 Part D Redesign Program Instructions issued on April 7, 2025, during a selected drug's price applicability period, Part D plan sponsors may immediately substitute a selected drug that is a brand name drug with a generic drug of the brand name drug, and a selected drug that is a reference product with an interchangeable biological product of the reference product, provided the notice and timing requirements specified in 42 C.F.R. § 423.120(e)(2)(i) and § 423.120(f)(2) – (4) are met. Consistent with the agency's longstanding practice, CMS will determine whether a new generic drug or interchangeable biological product is available on the market, and meets that eligibility criterion for immediate substitution, based on whether the RxCUI is included on the final FRF update before the bid submission deadline.

Appendix A

1) Formulary File Enhancements

- a) Adding Part D drugs, with or without UM
- b) Moving drugs to a more favorable beneficiary cost-sharing tier
- c) Removing PA requirements
- d) Changing PA Type from 1 (PA applies) to 2 (PA applies to new starts only) or changing from PA Type 1 or 2 to Type 3 (Part B versus Part D PA only, if a Part B versus Part D PA is appropriate)
- e) Removing QL restrictions
- f) Making an existing QL less restrictive (e.g., increasing the allowable QL amount without changing the QL days supply)
- g) Removing ST or making ST enhancements:
 - i) Removing an entire ST protocol (e.g., removal of ST requirements for the stepped drug(s) and the corresponding removal of step edits from all prerequisite drugs)
 - ii) Removing ST requirements for a drug(s) within the highest step level of a protocol (e.g., removal of step requirements for one step 2 drug within a step therapy protocol containing two step levels and more than one step 2 drug)
Adding prerequisite step 1 drugs to existing ST protocols (i.e., the new step 1 drug *or* the existing step 1 drugs would qualify the member for the step 2 drug)
 - iii) Changing ST Type from 1 (ST applies) to 2 (ST applies to new starts only)

2) Negative Formulary File Changes

- a) Removing FRF RxCUIs
- b) Moving drugs to a less favorable beneficiary cost-sharing tier, such that the out-of-pocket costs for some or all beneficiaries would be increased
- c) Adding or making more restrictive PA or ST requirements
- d) Adding or making an existing QL more restrictive (e.g., decreasing the allowable QL amount without changing the QL days supply OR increasing the QL days supply without changing the QL amount)

3) Non-Allowable Changes

- a) Changing formulary model/classification
- b) Changing the formulary file category or class names for existing formulary drugs
- c) Adding RxCUIs to a specialty tier that do not meet the cost criteria as outlined in the Final Contract Year (CY) 2026 Part D Bidding Instructions
- d) Removing prerequisite (e.g., Step 1 drugs) from existing step therapy protocols
- e) Adding a limited access indicator to an existing formulary drug
- f) Changing PA indication indicator from “1- All FDA-approved indications” to “2 - Some FDA-approved indications”
- g) Removing indications from the Indication-Based Coverage (IBC) file
- h) Making immediate negative formulary changes that do not meet the requirements outlined in 42 C.F.R. § 423.120(e)(2)