



House Bill 198 – Proponent Testimony
Ohio House Health Committee
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Chairman Lipps, Vice Chair Holmes, Ranking Member Russo, and members of the Ohio House Health Committee, thank you for having me here today to speak in support of House Bill 198, which would require health plan issuers to cover hearing aids and related services for children and persons under the age of 22. My name is Dr. Holle Aungst, and I am the Coordinator of Pediatric Audiology for the Head & Neck Institute at the Cleveland Clinic.

Cleveland Clinic Children's employs fellowship-trained pediatric otolaryngologists and pediatric audiologists who offer comprehensive and compassionate care for children with ear and hearing disorders. Experts in the Sections of Pediatric Otolaryngology and Audiology provide medically necessary treatment for ear and hearing disorders, including surgery and hearing aids -- treatment which can reduce the impact of hearing loss on a child's social and educational development.

When a child is diagnosed with hearing loss, we work closely with our pediatric colleagues in primary care, speech therapy, and genetics to establish an accurate diagnosis of the cause and degree of hearing loss, and then implement the steps necessary for addressing a child's hearing impairment.

Hearing loss affects 1 to 3 of every 1,000 newborns, and estimates range higher for school-aged children. Hearing loss in children can seriously interfere with speech, language and auditory development, impair communication, and adversely affect school performance. Not having access to hearing devices can affect a child's spoken language ability and future academic performance. This is why it is so critical to care for children with hearing issues as early as possible.

The cost for hearing devices and necessary audiology services is paid out-of-pocket by many families. This is because hearing devices are considered "cosmetic" and not a medical necessity by many insurance companies who deny coverage. These costs become a burden on families, and a financial challenge to pay for the much-needed devices and services for their children.

In my role at Cleveland Clinic, I test and diagnose babies as young as a few days old who have permanent hearing loss, and who require hearing aids. I have also fit babies with hearing devices as young as 6 weeks old. Research has shown that early treatment leads to better outcomes, and with proper treatment, children who have hearing loss can match skills with hearing peers by school age.

However, because many health insurance plans do not cover hearing aids and related audiology services, I have witnessed the choices that families must make for their child's health: grandparents paying all or part of the cost for hearing aids, extended families pooling money, or parents self-financing at high interest rates through credit card payments. I have also witnessed



the joy that families experience when their hard-of-hearing toddler says his first words, or their school aged child with hearing aids talks about her friends.

Medical technology has advanced tremendously for children who have permanent hearing loss. It is crucial to provide this technology to Ohio's children. Cleveland Clinic believes that providing excellent care goes beyond state-of-the-art equipment and the latest techniques. It also means providing that care with compassion and being an active member of the team on the families' journey with their child with hearing loss.

Once again, Cleveland Clinic voices its support for the passage of House Bill 198, so that children and persons under 22 are able to receive the much-needed coverage for hearing devices and care. We believe it is time that Ohio joins the 23 other states in the nation that have already passed legislation to address this issue. We are thankful to Representative Susan Manchester and Representative Allison Russo for introducing the bill.

Thank you, and I can be contacted to answer any questions you may have.