

**House Health Committee
House Bill 198
Written Proponent Testimony
December 13, 2022**

Chairman Lipps, Vice Chair Holmes, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on House Bill 198. Additionally, thank you to Leader Russo and Representative Manchester for introducing this very important legislation that would help many families across our state. My name is Crystal Henry, and I am writing to ask the committee to support HB 198, which would require commercial insurance plans to cover the cost of hearing aids up to \$2500 per ear every four years for children up to age 21, and favorable report on this bill.

I am an audiologist in the schools, and I am a mother to a child with a hearing loss. Ironically, my daughter's name is also Madeline. Madeline passed her universal newborn hearing screening but was later identified with a unilateral mild sensorineural hearing loss at roughly 19 months of age. I wasn't expecting my child to have hearing loss, but as an audiologist who works in the schools, I knew that my daughter would benefit from a hearing aid.

I didn't realize how challenging and frustrating it would be to obtain a hearing aid, though. I guess I was hopeful that there would be some type of insurance coverage. My child has primary and secondary insurance and neither insurance provides coverage for hearing aid(s) or any hearing aid related service. I couldn't believe it, but I started to learn that this was very common... I've spoken to other parents, and they had also experienced this. We shared our frustrations together.

A child with hearing loss deserves access to their auditory environment as soon as possible. A hearing aid is not a cosmetic device to an infant, toddler or school age child learning and growing in language, vocabulary, speech and social skills. Hearing is a first order event. My daughter was diagnosed with hearing loss in Feb 2022. She obtained a hearing aid in April 2022. She wears her hearing aid all the time, and she tolerates it well. I was actually impressed with how well she does for a two year old. She notices the difference. If she didn't like it, she'd remove it... she's two. She usually makes the rules (HaHa!)

From my experience, I can see why some parents may give up or become so confused to the point where they don't trust the process. If there is no access through insurance, there are other routes, but these routes can become time-consuming and confusing. With insurance covering hearing aids, the child's medical need will be treated earlier and parents may not be so stressed and doubtful about the process.

Approximately three in 1,000 babies are born with permanent hearing loss, making hearing loss one of the most common birth defects in America. Many families whose children are identified with a hearing loss at their infant hearing screening cannot afford the price of hearing aids for their child; the Better Hearing Institute sets this number at one out of five parents (22%). For children, hearing is the key to learning spoken language, performing academically, and engaging socially. Research shows the annual average education expenditure per student for a child with hearing loss is more than twice that for a child without a disability and the estimated lifetime

economic cost of hearing loss in children is more than \$400,000 per child. These costs can be avoided if a child is identified early and given appropriate educational, medical, and audiological services.

More than two dozen states have passed legislation requiring insurance coverage for hearing aids for children. Data from those states shows that the increase in the premium per member per health plan has been minimal to help cover these life-changing devices and services (the increase ranges from five to 39-cents per member per health plan).

Again, I encourage you to support HB 198. Thank you for taking the time to consider my position on this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Crystal Henry
914 Bowman Street, Niles, OH 44446
330-369-9248