



Chairman Johnson, Vice Chairman Cirino, Ranking Member Martin and all members of Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, please accept this testimony on substitute version of House Bill 509 regarding the occupational license review on behalf of the Hearing Healthcare Alliance of Ohio and the International Hearing Society. Our members represent hearing aid professionals licensed under the Speech and Hearing Professionals Board. I would like to share our concerns and perspective on the provisions now included in the legislation regarding our profession to move from a license to a registration.

For some background, under the legislation that enacted this occupational review process ([Senate Bill 255](#)), the legislature set a baseline of looking for the “least restrictive regulation” under 4798.01.

"Least restrictive regulation" means the public policy of relying on one of the following, listed from the least to the most restrictive, as a means of consumer protection: market competition; third-party or consumer-created ratings and reviews; private certification; specific private civil cause of action to remedy consumer harm; actions under Chapter 1345. of the Revised Code; regulation of the process of providing the specific goods or services to consumers; inspection; bonding or insurance; registration; government certification; specialty occupational license for medical reimbursement; and occupational license.

Since Ohio’s licensed hearing aid dealers and fitters in the state (federally referred to as hearing aid specialists) do qualify for and receive reimbursement for services under the [Ohio Department of Medicaid](#), the Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities and private insurance plans, under this definition, it is not appropriate to move our license to a registration. Insurers contract with licensed providers; therefore, removing the term license and replacing that with registration could limit Ohioans choice of provider if our services are no longer covered.

There have also been changes made at the federal level regarding over-the-counter hearing aids. These recently enacted regulations, the rules went into effect October 17, 2022, allow for hearing aids intended for mild to moderate hearing loss to be purchased over the counter without a professional hearing exam. Federal law specifies that traditional hearing aids, newly regulated as prescription hearing aids, which address all hearing loss levels, including severe and profound hearing loss, must be dispensed and recommended by a **licensed** professional. The changes proposed in House Bill 509 could severely limit access to hearing healthcare for those with all degrees of hearing loss as well as remove our ability to care for these patients as hearing aid dealers and fitters assist approximately half of hearing aids in the private market and are more concentrated in suburban and rural areas. We believe the intent of the occupational license review is to remove impediments to employment, however, the consequences of moving forward with this change would have the opposite effect.

We’d also like to highlight that Ohio has made meaningful changes to the licensure of these professionals over the last few years. Hearing aid dealers and fitters used to be licensed by an independent board housed in the Ohio Department of Health. Under the biennial budget bill of 2017 ([House Bill 49](#)), our board was merged with the Board of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology to create the new Speech and Hearing Professionals Board.

Expanding on that merger, [House Bill 420](#) passed at the end of 2018. This bill changed our licensing cycle from one year to two years, aligning with most other professions. HB 420 also moved all fees from the law to the rules. As a result of this, the newly created Speech and Hearing Professionals Board was able to enact rules that resulted in significant fee reductions for the Ohio licensees. For example, renewal fees went from \$157 each year to \$120 every two years.

The work done under HB 49 and HB 420 has already accomplished the efficiencies and fee reductions that the occupational review intends to identify. We do not feel additional changes are warranted at this time. And in fact, could put in jeopardy coverage and reimbursement for our services.

According to the LSC research document provided to this committee as part of your review process, all surrounding states require a license for this profession. If this recommendation is enacted, this would make consumer protections for Ohio seniors (our primary demographic of hearing impaired) less than almost every other State in the union. Further the recommendation report identifies the reason as “there are no training or experience requirements associated with this license.” While it is true that Ohio law does not have a higher education requirement associated with entering this field, there are requirements to pass a national exam to qualify for licensure. Preparation for this exam requires training and study in the field. Most enter the field under employment where they get training directly from professionals already in the field (apprenticeship model). This is one of the few entries into the healthcare field that do not require a specific degree and is a great option for those Ohioans looking for a career that allows them to help people. The committee shouldn’t diminish the value of the license in this field by adopting this recommendation.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our comments on these proposed recommendations. We hope the committee will not pursue this change. I would happy to answer any questions you may have.