

House Insurance Committee
House Bill 152
Proponent Testimony
June 7, 2023

Chairman Lampton, Vice Chair Barhorst, Ranking Member Miranda, and members of the House Insurance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on House Bill 152. Additionally, thank you to Representative Weinstein and Representative Young for introducing this very important legislation that would help many families across our state. My name is Holly Gerth and I am writing to ask the committee to support HB 152, 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 favorably report this bill.

I am a pediatric audiologist at a large children's hospital in Columbus, Ohio. I have been practicing audiology for nearly eleven years, and specifically in Ohio for eight years. I have a strong role in universal newborn hearing screening, and am passionate about early diagnosis and intervention. I work primarily in the inpatient setting, with the goal to diagnosing infants and children in a timely manner. As I have seen firsthand over the last decade, early diagnosis of hearing loss and subsequent intervention (many times with hearing aids) is absolutely crucial to setting these children up for success.

As you know, the acuity of children we see at the hospital is high. In my line of work, on the inpatient side, I am seeing babies who were born extremely prematurely. I am seeing young children undergoing chemotherapy, radiation, bone marrow transplant. I am seeing patients who have survived traumatic accidents and are learning to live with a traumatic brain injury. This is a small sample of children that we are diagnosing with hearing loss that needs intervention with hearing aids. In this critical population that we serve, once hearing loss is diagnosed it seems fairly simple that the next step is to provide access to sounds and speech that the hearing loss is impeding reception of. What is not simple, however, is access to these necessary medical devices to provide children this access. In no way are hearing aids anything except a necessary device to provide children the access they need. So they do not have to work as hard to hear. To learn. To speak. Hearing aids are essential medical care and should absolutely be covered by insurance, for all people, but particularly children. In the face of a new diagnosis, such as hearing loss, families should not have to decide if they earn enough money for their child to hear.

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 152. Thank you for taking the time to consider my position on this important legislation.

Sincerely,

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