

Senate Insurance Committee
House Bill 152
Proponent Testimony
November 20, 2024

Chairman Hackett, Vice Chair Lang, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the Senate Insurance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on House Bill 152. Additionally, thank you to Representative Weinstein for introducing this very important legislation that would help many families across our state. My name is Lea Khoury, 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 have been a pediatric audiologist for over 20 years, and I have had the honor of working at Cleveland Clinic since 2008. I have seen first-hand what an impact the early fitting of amplification can make on a child's life. I have encountered countless families who have not had the means to pay for hearing aids. Their children very often encounter speech and language delays or fall behind in their learning at school. If they are lucky enough to be fit with amplification through a grant, Medicaid, or school, they may or may not get what they need. However, I have also encountered families who were able to piece together enough money to purchase a set of hearing aids, such as the family of my patient, Sofia. Her family owned a catering business, and they started hosting different tasting events to raise money for Sofia's hearing aids. When they eventually raised the \$4,000 she needed, they were able to buy a set of premium devices. With consistent use, Sofia has gone from a child who seemed aloof and unresponsive to a child who is fully engaged in life. She is thriving in school because she now has access to her environment. She can hear the sounds of speech/language/learning all around her because she was given her sense of hearing back through amplification. Hearing aid use should not be limited to children whose families can afford them. Hearing aids should be worn by every child who needs them regardless of the ability to pay precisely because they can dramatically alter the entire course of a child's life.

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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