

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 Julie Hazelbaker, 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 currently a clinical educator in the Doctor of Audiology program at The Ohio State University. In the last 26 years I have worked as a pediatric audiologist at 3 sites (Columbus Speech and Hearing Center, Ohio Health Hospitals, and Nationwide Children's Hospital). I have diagnosed many children with hearing loss and recommended amplification (hearing aids). There is a wealth of evidence confirming that if hearing impaired children are not diagnosed and treated with amplification early, they will experience significant delays in language development. Language delays interfere with the development of literacy skills. Literacy skills are directly related to academic achievement. I have witnessed delays in treatment of hearing-impaired kids because parents had to figure out how to pay for the devices. Many would borrow from their 401k or other retirement plans. Many would seek the help of family members. Many would reach out to community organizations (ie: Sertoma clubs, women's groups/clubs). For those who qualified, we applied for help from the Complex Medical Help Program (CMH). The search for funding often delayed the time to treatment, which again, affects speech and language development in the early years - in the critical language learning time.

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%). Again, 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).

I strongly encourage you to support HB 152. I have personally witnessed the consequences of untreated hearing loss due to financial hardship; and it is heartbreaking. Thank you for taking the time to consider my position on this important legislation.

Sincerely,

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