

House Bill 198- Proponent Testimony

Ohio House Health Committee: Gina M. Hounam, PhD

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May 11, 2021

Chairman Lipps, Vice-Chairman Holmes, Ranking Member Russo and members of the House Health Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and speak in support of HB 198 (Madeline's Law) which would require health benefit plans to provide coverage for hearing aids and related services for Ohioans under 22 years of age.

My name is Dr. Gina Hounam and I am an audiologist and program manager at Nationwide Children's Hospital serving children who are deaf/HOH ages birth to 21. I have been practicing as an audiologist for 20 years. I have seen how hearing loss impacts an individual at every stage of life. I have advocated for hearing aids for children and adults for 20 years, all of which have been within the great state of Ohio.

When dealing with insurance providers to obtain authorization for hearing aids, audiologists are often asked to consider the "cosmetics" of hearing aids. This has always been so curious to me as a provider because our conversation surrounding device selection, prescriptive strength and programming algorithms never focus on how this will look. The conversation rather always focuses on what environments the child is in that will require improved access to the sounds around them. Environments that come to mind are: improved access to a teacher's voice in a noisy classroom, access to safety sounds when at the bus stop or playground, the ability to participate with peers in a playgroup with full inclusion, consideration for a sports team providing equal access to the coach's directions, or simply the ability to hear your family conversations without missing a beat. These are not cosmetic choices, but rather rights a child has to access the information and conversations that support their academic and social-emotional well-being.

Research has provided us much data to support that children must be identified with hearing loss early and intervention subsequently provided to develop language on par with their hearing peers. We have invested in state programs that support this through universal newborn screening programs as well as early intervention within Ohio. Hearing aids are a covered product under Ohio Medicaid and as part of the authorization process we must attest to their medical necessity. We are already doing the right thing in Ohio; we simply need to expand this to ALL children so we can be a leader in health equity.

I am aware that insurance mandates bring with them a consideration of increased cost. I do think it critical for those of you with the power of decision to carefully weigh the facts provided to you regarding the real cost increase to business, against the cost savings to healthcare, special education, and lost wages all known to be impacted by untreated hearing loss. Please consider allowing hearing to be a basic human right for all children in Ohio. I have seen the potential in these kids, and they will pay this forward when the time comes. Again, I encourage you to

support HB 198. Thank you for taking the time to consider my position in support of this important legislation.