

Testimony of the Connecticut ENT Society
On
**HB 5672 An Act Expanding Insurance Coverage for Hearing Aids for
Children**

Presented to the Insurance and Real Estate Committee

By
David Emmel, M.D.

5672

Good Afternoon Senator Crisco, Representative Fontana and other distinguished members of this Committee. For the record my name is Dr. David Emmel, president-elect of the Connecticut Society of Eye Physicians. I am standing in for Dr. Scott Schoem, the Director of Pediatric Otolaryngology at the Connecticut Childrens Medical Center in Hartford and President of the CT ENT Society, who represents over 90% of the otolaryngologists practicing in Connecticut, but could not attend this hearing because at this moment he is performing surgery. I am here to convey to you the message that the ear, nose and throat doctors of Connecticut support HB 5672.

Pediatric otolaryngologists diagnose and coordinate the care for children with hearing impairment every day. Most hearing impairment that is not surgically correctable is greatly improved with quality digital hearing aids. These hearing aids are essential for infants and toddlers to develop proper speech and for school age children to learn and thrive. Early language acquisition is critical to school readiness and early literacy. The goal of the "Ready by 5, Fine by 9" early childhood education program is to provide for all children in Connecticut to reach their highest learning potential. However, we have failed to provide the necessary means for the select group of children in Connecticut with hearing impairment.

To its great credit, Connecticut was one of the first states in America to implement a universal newborn hearing screening program. Through the Birth to Three Program, Connecticut has been a national leader in providing excellent services for children, including obtaining hearing aids for children with hearing impairment. However, once a child reaches the third birthday, that child and their family is left almost on their own to provide hearing aids. The current state law originally authored by Sen. Toni Harp in 2000, provides the benefit of up to \$1,000 towards the total cost of hearing aids by health insurance.

The fact is, that unlike eyeglasses which are relatively cheap, hearing aids are expensive. Standard routine digital hearing aids cost approximately \$2,500. If a child has hearing loss in both ears, the cost is \$5,000. The life-span of hearing aids for children is between 3-5 years before they need replacement. Therefore, for many children who are diagnosed with hearing loss after 3 years old, they must do without the hearing aid because their parents cannot afford the cost. And, for many children who originally received their hearing aids through the Birth to Three Program, once their hearing aids break or are no longer powerful enough to overcome worsening hearing, they again do without. The result is that they have trouble hearing in school, and they fall behind academically.

The State Department of Education lists 711 children in Connecticut of school age who have hearing impairment. Many of these children already have hearing aids. Some parents can afford the cost through payment plans. However, for those who do not have hearing aids due to the cost, we as a society have failed those children. We can do better.

The cost to individual insurance carriers to provide hearing aid benefits is minimal. Yet, for the individual child, it means the ability to hear, to learn, to thrive and fulfill their academic potential. In closing I ask you to support HB5672 and give these 711 children in Connecticut a fighting chance to excel in learning and development. Thank -you for your time and I will try to answer any questions directed at me.