

2/11/2010

HB 5009 AN ACT CONCERNING WELLNESS PROGRAMS AND EXPANSION OF HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE.

Good Afternoon Mr. Chairman(s) and Committee Members,

I am Denise Monte, a clinical and educational audiologist at the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford. I have been providing audiological services to Connecticut children in since 1988. I am on the committee of Governmental Affairs for the Connecticut Academy of Audiology. I am here today to speak on behalf of our members in support of HB 5009. This act would expand current coverage for hearing aids for children 12 and under to also include children ages 13 to 18. In February 2008 this academy supported an identical proposal: SB 276 An act for expanding health insurance coverage for hearing aids for children.

Audiologists are specially trained to diagnose and treat hearing disorders. This treatment includes the prescription and fitting of hearing aids. Any bill that seeks to expand coverage for hearing aids for children or adults is generally well received by both audiologists and the families and patients we serve. Children who have hearing loss, yet do not have hearing aids, can have academic, social, and self-esteem issues when compared to their normally-hearing peers.

3 in every 1000 newborns have hearing loss making hearing loss the most commonly occurring birth defect. The Office of Vital Records reported 42,187 births for 2006 suggesting approximately 126 infants in Connecticut were born with hearing loss in just that one year (data from Connecticut Department of Public Health and National Center for Hearing Assessment and Management statistics on hearing loss).

The State of Connecticut was one of the first in the country to mandate universal hearing screenings for newborns. This was done because the importance of early identification and treatment of hearing loss was recognized. Currently, full funding for hearing aids for children under age 3 comes from our state funded Birth-to-Three program. Full funding is also available for children of all ages who are eligible for Medicaid/ Husky A/Husky Plus. Partial funding is available for children eligible for Husky B and may be available through Title V, CT Lifespan Respite Coalition to families that meet strict income guidelines (was 300% poverty level or less). Unfortunately many families are not eligible for these programs and must use personal funds to purchase hearing aids for their children. A 2007 study by the National Center for Hearing Assessment and Management found 22% of families who did not obtain hearing aids for their children did so because they could not afford to purchase them.

Currently, the State of Connecticut has mandated that private insurance companies provide coverage of \$1000 for children 12 years and under. (Unfortunately, self-funded or out of state administrated companies are exempt from this mandate limiting access to some children under 12) Families with children age 13-17 currently do not receive funding for hearing aids unless they qualify for a state funded program such as Husky A, Husky Plus, or Title V Coalition.

The life expectancy of a hearing aid for a child is 3 to 5 years. It is therefore reasonable to assume that a hearing impaired child would need to have their hearing aids replaced during their adolescence. Other states with a similar mandated insurance benefit include their teens. Why has CT dropped the ball for its teens when it has been proactive with newborn hearing screening, Birth to Three programs, the current mandated \$1000 coverage to age 12, and BRS serving the 18 and over population?

The proposed \$1000 benefit, although small relative to the average cost of a pair of digital hearing aids typically recommended for children, would provide some financial help for families to purchase hearing aids and could make the difference for their children having vs. not having needed hearing aids. The Academy supports expanding the current statute to include children 18 and under. Children with hearing loss from ages 13 to 18 have been historically an underserved population in our state.

On behalf of the members of the CT Academy of Audiology I thank you for the opportunity to express our opinion on this important issue. If the Academy can in any way provide you with additional information on hearing loss and hearing aids, please feel free to contact us. Thank you for your time.

Denise Monte, M.S. CCC-A, F-AAA, Board Certified

Connecticut Academy of Audiology