



AMERICAN
SPEECH-LANGUAGE-
HEARING
ASSOCIATION

March 15, 2006

New Jersey Mandated Health Benefits Advisory Commission

Re: **Bill A289; “Grace’s Law”**
The Need for Coverage of Hearing Aids in Health Plans

Dear Advisory Commission Members:

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, the scientific and professional organization for over 123,000 speech-language pathologists and audiologists, is pleased to learn that New Jersey regards hearing as so important that it is considering a mandated health benefit to cover hearing aids. Hearing is priceless. Good hearing helps us communicate with others, be successful at work and school, and enjoy life. Permanent hearing loss in children interferes with the normal development of speech, language, literacy, and social-emotional development. Children with mild to moderate hearing loss, on average, achieve one to four grade levels lower than their peers with normal hearing, unless appropriate management occurs.

Fortunately, there is help for children and adults experiencing hearing loss. Hearing aids have proven effective in alleviating the communicative and psychosocial consequences of hearing loss. For infants, early detection of hearing loss and appropriate intervention within the child’s first year of life is an evolving standard of care. Children whose hearing loss is identified by 3 months and who start intervention by 6 months have the same language abilities as their peers by the time they enter kindergarten. Early intervention by audiologists and speech-language pathologists allows many children to compete successfully in school with their hearing peers. Hearing aid amplification is a critical element of this intervention. Adults report benefits from the use of hearing aids in many areas including mental health, sense of safety, and self-confidence.

Audiologists are professionals who diagnose the functional aspect of hearing and balance disorders and provide communication rehabilitation for people with impaired hearing, as well as select, fit, and evaluate hearing aids. The role of the audiologist is to identify, evaluate, and provide auditory habilitation/rehabilitation to infants, children, and adults who are hard of hearing and deaf. Speech-language pathologists are involved with all aspects of communication including speech production, language development, voice characteristics and aural habilitation/rehabilitation.

Hearing loss affects 4 infants per 1,000 births. The prevalence of hearing loss in school age children is between 11% and 15%. Overall, 18% of the adult population in

the United States experiences some hearing difficulty. Some causes of hearing loss include chronic ear infections, certain drugs, viral or bacterial infection, birth defects, aging, and exposure to loud noise.

Evaluation and treatment of hearing loss by audiologists and speech-language pathologists is a medically necessary health service. Medicare defines medical necessity as “a service that is reasonable and necessary for the diagnosis or treatment of an illness or injury, or to improve the functioning of a malformed body member.” Hearing loss is an organic, physiological condition of the body that clearly meets this definition. Loss of hearing represents a loss of body function and services to treat this impairment must be regarded as meeting medical necessity.

Many health plans have coverage for evaluation and treatment of hearing loss as well as coverage of hearing aids. Cost data indicates costs to be minimal for adding these benefits. Hearing aids represent a relatively inexpensive intervention for the amount of benefit gained, especially when calculating the long-term benefits of early intervention to children and society.

The ability to hear is one of our most valued possessions. Hearing loss can have a devastating impact on communication and psychosocial skills. It is fortunate that treatment is available which has proven to be so successful in alleviating communication and adjustment difficulties for the short and long term. Please help to ensure that the children and adults of New Jersey can obtain audiological services and hearing aids by mandating these services.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me by e-mail at jmccarty@asha.org or by phone at 301-897-5700, ext. 4194.

Sincerely,

Janet McCarty
Private Health Plans Advisor