February 26, 2016

Iowa Senate Commerce Committee
1007 East Grand Avenue
Des Moines, IA 50319

RE: S.F. 2072

Dear Senators Courtney, Sinclair, and Schoenjahn:

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) is the national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for more than 182,000 members and affiliates who are audiologists; speech-language pathologists; speech, language, and hearing scientists; audiology and speech-language pathology support personnel; and students. Over 1,250 of our members reside in Iowa.

We are writing with comments on S.F. 2072 related to the coverage of services for autism spectrum disorder. We are please that speech-language pathology services are included under therapeutic care; however, there are no provisions for how coverage will be provided beyond the mandated coverage of up to $36,000 per individual per year for applied behavioral analysis (ABA) services. Further, the bill requires that any group policy or plan may not reduce the mandated coverage of ABA services in order to provide any additional necessary services, such as those provided by speech-language pathologists (SLPs).

**Autism Spectrum Disorder**

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex neurobiological disorder characterized by social impairment, communication difficulties, and repetitive and stereotyped behaviors. Social interaction and communication, speech production, understanding and using spoken and written language are examples of neurodevelopmental functions and are not solely “behaviors.” Speech-language and social communication impairments are the core features of individuals with ASD for which speech-language pathologists (SLPs) play a central role in assessment and treatment.

**Speech-Language Pathologists Uniquely Qualified to Treat ASD**

The acquisition of language skills is foundational to cognitive and social development. Nationally certified and state licensed speech-language pathologists are fully qualified and the primary service provider for individuals with a full range of communication disorders. Speech-language pathologists are often on the front line for preschool screening and intervention of autism spectrum disorder. The unusual developmental characteristics associated with ASD are noticed immediately by SLPs evaluating language acquisition patterns and milestones. It is estimated that one in every 68 children is diagnosed with autism, with 1.5 million individuals in the U.S. affected. Eighty-two percent of ASHA certified school-based speech-language pathologists serve students with ASD.
Comprehensive Assessment and Treatment is Needed to Treat ASD

We believe SLPs should be included in any comprehensive assessment for individuals with ASD, as SLPs are able to prioritize intervention objectives and coordinate planning for communicative success. While ABA therapists may work on an individual’s behavior, an SLP focuses on understanding and use of language, social communication, literacy, speech production, and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). We believe that individuals with ASD must be provided with the full complement of services to meet their individual needs. Utilizing a team of qualified professionals including physicians, mental health professionals, behavioral therapists, SLPs, and others will ensure that the individual diagnosed with ASD will have a comprehensive assessment to determine how to best meet his/her unique needs. Coordination and collaboration by professionals serving on the treatment team is necessary to ensure that the individual with ASD and their families receive all of the services necessary for him/her to benefit from treatment.

Insurance coverage of all necessary services is vital to ensure that the complex needs of individuals with ASD are addressed by competent service providers. Providing only ABA services under the mandate will not meet the complex needs of individuals with ASD and their family.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments. Should you have any questions, please contact Janet Deppe, ASHA’s director of state advocacy, at 301-296-5668 or by e-mail at jdeppe@asha.org.

Sincerely,

Jaynee A. Handelsman, PhD, CCC-A
2016 ASHA President