

Submitter: Brendan Vasanth

On Behalf Of:

Committee: House Committee On Behavioral Health and Health Care

Measure: HB2994

My name is Brendan Vasanth. I am a 16 year old sophomore at Riverdale High School in Portland, and I am honored to write to such important people on this pressing issue. I am writing in support of HB 2994: Insurance Coverage Fix for Children's Hearing Aids. In 2018, the Oregon Legislature passed HB4104 which requires insurers to cover hearing aids, cochlear implants, and assistive listening devices to help children who are deaf and hard of hearing receive critical access to sound. Unfortunately, many families and children are still unable to access the equipment and services that they need because insurance companies charge them in other ways like high deductibles. This bill would mandate a fix to these loopholes. Bills similar to HB 2994 have helped me a lot. I was born in November 2006. No one on either side of my family had hearing loss, but, luckily, I benefitted from a law which required hospitals to screen infants for hearing loss at birth. I failed my newborn newborn screen and was referred for further testing which confirmed my profound hearing loss. My family's insurance did not cover hearing aids, but my hearing center had temporary grant support to cover loaner hearing aids and earmolds. From this grant, I received my first hearing aids at 4 weeks old. Because I was growing so fast, my ear molds had to be changed every 2-3 weeks or else they would not fit properly. Alongside this, I started intensive speech therapy and had monthly audiology appointments.

By 5 months, it was clear that I would need bilateral cochlear implants. The insurance battle began. After 3 months of denials, my parents, speech language pathologist, audiologist, and ENT obtained approval for sequential bilateral cochlear implants. I received the first at 8 months and the second at 11 months. Then the real work began. I had to take 8 hours of individual and group speech therapy every week and had monthly audiology appointments. My parents had to spend numerous hours on the phone fighting the insurance company's denials for many of the appointments and for broken cochlear implant parts, dead batteries, etc.

Eventually, this tedious process started to show its benefits. I was mainstreamed into a community preschool just before my 3rd birthday. I still needed a special microphone to better hear my teacher, a teacher of the deaf to help me navigate school, and a lot of outside speech therapy and audiology appointments. I even needed the support of the community. When I lost a \$10,000 cochlear implant processor in a sandbox at a public playground, a good samaritan recognized how valuable the processor was, remembered the school uniform of the children playing in the park, and returned my processor to my school, just a few hours later!

All the hard work paid off. After 3rd grade, I graduated from speech therapy and in-school services. I didn't need to use a special microphone anymore, and I could understand my friends almost as well as anyone. I'm currently an honors student at

Riverdale High School. I play soccer and basketball and run track for school. I'm planning to study business in college. I am very fortunate to have the support of my family, an amazing hearing loss team (including Sound Start and the hearing loss division of OHSU), insurance, and resources to receive everything I need to succeed. Without all of this help, my story might not be the same. I want to ensure that all the kids of Oregon who are born deaf have the best chance possible to live normal and fulfilling lives. The passage of this bill would help to make that dream a reality. Thank you for your consideration of this bill which will help other children like me.

Sincerely,

Brendan Vasanth