

Re: S.132

April 9, 2021

Good Morning Senators,

I am sure at this point you have been given more than enough information on the statistics and demographics about how hearing loss affects over 70,000 Vermonters and the insidious catastrophic effects on health, quality of life, relationships and careers. Today I offer some "shoes" to walk in.

I have had hearing loss of varying degrees my whole life. When I was a child in the fifties my hearing loss was seen as obstinance and willful disobedience. Back then if you were not actually Deaf, hearing loss was seen as matter of "choice". I was expected to muddle through, and muddle through I did. I got my first hearing aid when I was 35 years old. What a revelation! The world opened up and suddenly life and job got easier. Currently I wear a 13 year old hearing aid in one ear and a 4 year old in the other. I am retired. I hate thinking about when/if one fails.

My (now adult) son became suddenly unilaterally deaf when he was seven years old. It hit out of the blue, no illness no warning, just.....gone. As he described it at the time: "A mysterious virus came and snatched my ear away." We scrimped and scraped to get him a hearing aid for that side just so that he would be safe and have some dim awareness of environmental sounds on that side. He now listens to people with a rakish tilt to his head that people find charming, but actually indicates the struggle he goes through to follow conversations and be in the loop. He says a hearing aid is unaffordable.

My husband has progressive hearing loss that at this point is severe/profound. His loss was not a surprise since a number of members of his family share the same genetic trait. But all the same I wonder if his experience is worse because he grieves each loss in increments as his sense of sound slips bit by bit from his grasp. I cannot imagine his isolation and despair if the VA had not given him hearing aids. They are the only way he can carry on a conversation or have any environmental awareness.

I worked as a Counselor for Deaf and Hard of Hearing at Vocational Rehabilitation for over twenty years. I helped people get an education and jobs. I met with so many desperate people who were hanging on by a thread trying to keep their jobs, about to be fired due to mistakes and misunderstandings. All because of untreated hearing loss. I met with people desperate to save their family relationships and marriages due to miscommunications and alienation all because of untreated hearing loss. Hearing Aids do not restore perfect hearing but they go a long long way to restoring FUNCTIONALITY to the person with hearing loss.

The issue is personal.

Hearing aids means the difference between functioning effectively in our lives, within our families and in our jobs, or not functioning very well or at all. It is as simple as that. The exorbitant cost of hearing aids puts treatment out of reach for far too many Vermonters.

I am well aware that insurance companies are loathe to cover hearing aids. After all, their primary objective is to lavishly reward the CEO and to grow stock portfolios. Happy shareholders means "success" to them. But to leave people stranded without hope of effective treatment for their hearing loss is a harsh cruelty only found in the American medical insurance industry.

I am sure Senators you have already been inundated with the poised and polished insurance lobbyists who bemoan the increased costs for something they deem unimportant. But I urge you to look at the HUMAN cost of abandoning Vermonters with hearing loss who need access to these vital medical devices. The health and well being of Vermonters is what should be our focus and our priority.

Vermont is the only New England state who has failed to provide this help legislatively. The insurance companies know this. Those of us with hearing loss know this. And now, you know this too.

Please. I urge you to vote on the side of people. Vermonters with hearing loss need you to stand with us.

Thank you.

Deb Charlea Baker

Chester, Vermont

Hearing Loss Association of America, Vermont Chapter