

Hello! My name is Dr. Allison Reitz and I am a pediatric audiologist here in the state of Maine that participates with Mainecare. I also am a member of Maine's Newborn Hearing Screening Advisory Board. As a pediatric audiologist, a large portion of my patient population has Mainecare insurance. For my patients under 21 who have Mainecare and have bilateral hearing loss, they can get two hearing aids, no questions asked. The flexibility that Mainecare provides with pediatric patients is such an asset not only to these children but to their families as well - allowing me to provide such a necessary piece of technology.

However, I am concerned for them and their hearing healthcare when they turn 21. At age 21, they are no longer allowed to obtain two devices through Mainecare – even though the state deemed it necessary for the past 21 years of their life. Adults with Mainecare are only eligible for one hearing aid even if they have hearing loss in both ears. This not only causes a financial burden but can impact overall quality of life if they do not have access to working technology.

According to a study completed in 2007 by Chislom, Hnath et al. called “A Systematic Review of Health-Related Quality of Life and Hearing Aids” - hearing aids for adults with sensorineural hearing loss have a robust, medium-to-large effect on their quality of life – meaning that there were strong reductions in the emotional and social impacts of hearing loss of participants. Emotional and social implications of hearing loss can look like the following: social isolation, depression, anxiety to name a few.

Another statistic I would like to mention comes from the National Library of medicine; this study found that 33 percent of deaf adults who graduated high school were receiving SSI benefits compared with only 12 percent of those with some college education. While we have to keep sample size in mind, studies like this prove the implications hearing loss can have on education.

As we know, education has a direct correlation with employment status (National Research Council (US) Committee on Disability Determination for Individuals with Hearing Impairments et al.). Those now young adults with hearing loss are already at a disadvantage in a world that relies so much on spoken language. “For those individuals with early onset of hearing loss, the challenges for acquisition of spoken language, development of reading skills, and educational achievement result in limited job opportunities. These problems, combined with needs for better career guidance, job training, and job placement, result in poor preparation for entering the workforce on a competitive basis (Phillippe and Auvenshine, 1985).”

As an audiologist, I strongly encourage this committee to move forward with LD 167 as I firmly believe it will improve quality of life of those who are currently in that 21+ age criteria and for those who will need those services in the future. Thank you.

Chisolm, Theresa Hnath, et al. *American Academy of Audiology*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2007, pp. 151–183, https://doi.org/https://www.audiology.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/JAAA_18_2_7.pdf.

National Research Council (US) Committee on Disability Determination for Individuals with Hearing Impairments. “Impact of Hearing Loss on Daily Life and the Workplace.” Edited by RA Dobie and S Van Hemel, *Hearing Loss: Determining Eligibility for Social Security Benefits*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1 Jan. 1970, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207836/.

Dear Committee Members,

I write to you today as a constituent in the first congressional district of Maine and a licensed audiologist practicing in the state of Maine in support of LD 167, "An Act to Provide 2 Hearing Aids to MaineCare Members with Diagnosed Hearing Loss". The passage of LD 167 would significantly improve the lives of MaineCare patients needing hearing aids and reduce redundancy and inefficiency in providing audiologic care in our state.

My primary goals when fitting patients with hearing aids are to increase communication ability and decrease listening effort so they can stay engaged in the relationships and activities they care about. Those with untreated hearing loss have a notable increase in listening effort - this means that rather than taking in sound naturally, they often have to piece together what is said using lip-reading, context clues, and their knowledge of the English language. Puzzling out what others are saying can be exhausting for many individuals, and patients have admitted they will often "smile and nod" rather than go through the effort of staying engaged. Humans have a finite amount of cognitive processing power, and when a person has untreated hearing loss, much of that processing power is taken up by simply communicating with their loved ones.

Communication becomes exponentially more difficult in places with background noise, and patients have similarly admitted they avoid establishments like restaurants or grocery stores because of how difficult it is for them to understand others. These struggles are very socially isolating and are detrimental to a person's emotional and cognitive health. Our brains use symmetric hearing between both ears to navigate communication in noisy environments and identify where sounds come from. Hearing aid manufacturers rely on interfacing between the left and right hearing instruments to engage noise-management settings and help increase speech understanding.

Today, MaineCare coverage will only cover a single hearing aid, regardless of the medical need for left and right hearing instruments. The options to obtain the second hearing aid require applying to other programs (many of which are funded by state and local funds) or require our MaineCare patients to pay out of pocket for the second device. Limiting those on MaineCare to a single hearing aid, even when medically indicated, negatively impacts our patients' safety, activities of daily functioning, cognitive health, and overall quality of life. Other states in New England cover binaural hearing instruments for their Medicaid constituents, let us join them in providing excellent evidence-based care.

If anyone would like to discuss the benefits of binaural hearing aid fittings and audiologic care in the state of Maine, don't hesitate to reach out.

Best,

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