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*Testimony of Representative Anne Graham sponsoring*

## **LD 167, An Act to Provide 2 Hearing Aids to MaineCare Members Diagnosed with Hearing Loss**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services*

Good afternoon, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and my esteemed colleagues of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. I am Anne Graham and I am here to present **LD 167 An Act to Provide 2 Hearing Aids to MaineCare Members with Diagnosed Hearing Loss**.

This proposal was brought to me by my constituent, Dr. Jamie Onofrio, a clinical audiologist at MaineHealth. She sought me out at the Gray Blueberry Festival this past summer, and asked “Did you know that MaineCare only covers one hearing aid rather than two?” I said, “That’s ridiculous.” But, it is true. Jamie is here, along with one of her colleagues, to testify as an experienced professional in the field to help us understand what this means from a clinical medical perspective.

I would like to share with you information that may help inform your decision to support the bill. The first is from an article titled, The Benefits of Binaural Hearing Aids: Why Two is Better Than One, published in 2024.<sup>1</sup>

It states that when someone is considering hearing aids, they have to ask themselves a crucial question: Is using two devices necessary? Understanding the advantages of binaural hearing aids, consisting of two devices, one for each ear, holds the answer. Binaural hearing is the natural process of utilizing both ears simultaneously. Our auditory system relies on input from both ears to accurately locate sounds, comprehend speech in noisy surroundings and create a rich, immersive listening experience.<sup>2</sup>

In cases of bilateral hearing loss, where hearing loss affects both ears, relying on a single hearing aid fails to fully restore this natural binaural hearing process. The listening experience may feel unbalanced or unnatural.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.audiologycharlotte.com/blog/the-benefits-of-binaural-hearing-aids#:~:text=By%20wearing%20two%20hearing%20aids,separate%20speech%20from%20background%20noise>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.audiologycharlotte.com/blog/the-benefits-of-binaural-hearing-aids#:~:text=By%20wearing%20two%20hearing%20aids,separate%20speech%20from%20background%20noise>

By wearing two hearing aids, users can experience an improved signal-to-noise ratio, as the devices work together to more effectively separate speech from background noise.

When hearing loss affects both ears but only one hearing aid is used, the brain must exert significant effort to process the imbalanced auditory input, leading to increased listening fatigue and cognitive strain, particularly during extended conversations or in noisy environments. Binaural hearing aids address this issue by evenly distributing the auditory workload between both ears, thereby reducing the cognitive effort required for speech comprehension. This balanced approach to hearing assistance results in numerous benefits, including decreased mental fatigue at the end of the day, enhanced ability to focus on and follow conversations and improved stamina for social interactions and various activities.

In review of other states' coverage, all states cover one hearing aid per ear, not just one hearing aid for one year.<sup>3</sup> That is not the case in Maine.

Another article I bring to your attention to is from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health titled, Hearing Loss and the Dementia Connection.<sup>4</sup>

If you have hearing loss, you have a greater chance of developing dementia, according to a 2020 Lancet commission report that lists hearing loss as one of the top risk factors for dementia.<sup>5</sup>

Hearing loss can make the brain work harder, forcing it to strain to hear and fill in the gaps. That comes at the expense of other thinking and memory systems. Another possibility: Hearing loss causes the aging brain to shrink more quickly. A third possibility is that hearing loss leads people to be less socially engaged, which is hugely important to remaining intellectually stimulated. If you can't hear very well, you may not go out as much, so the brain is less engaged and active.

To quantify hearing loss impact, hearing loss is estimated to account for 8% of dementia cases.<sup>6</sup> This means that hearing loss may be responsible for 800,000 of the nearly 10 million new cases of dementia diagnosed each year.<sup>7</sup>

In this committee, we often hear of one's lived experience. I would like to briefly share my lived experience. Several years ago, my primary care physician noted I had hearing loss and I was referred to an audiologist. Fast forward to now, I have two hearing aids that are covered by my health insurance thanks to state law. I can attest to the benefit it has had to my health and wellbeing. I am hopeful wearing hearing aids will also help me avoid dementia.

Thank you for your attention. I would be happy to answer your questions, but I will defer to the experts following me.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.audiology.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/State-Hearing-Health-Insurance-Mandates-2022.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2021/hearing-loss-and-the-dementia-connection>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736\(20\)30367-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736(20)30367-6/fulltext)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thelancet.com/infographics-do/dementia-risk>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/dementia>