

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1264

As Reported by House Committee On:
Health Care & Wellness

Title: An act relating to medical assistance coverage for hearing devices for adults.

Brief Description: Specifying medical assistance coverage for hearing devices for adults.

Sponsors: Representatives McBride, Harris, Blake, Appleton, Goodman, Kloba, Tarleton, Jinkins, Kilduff, Fey, Doglio, Ryu, Pollet and Dolan.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Health Care & Wellness: 1/25/17, 2/15/17 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Establishes benefits for the purchase of hearing aids and related equipment and services for adults on Medicaid.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH CARE & WELLNESS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 13 members: Representatives Cody, Chair; Macri, Vice Chair; Caldier, Clibborn, Harris, Jinkins, MacEwen, Riccelli, Robinson, Rodne, Slatter, Stonier and Tharinger.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 2 members: Representatives Schmick, Ranking Minority Member; Graves, Assistant Ranking Minority Member.

Staff: Chris Blake (786-7392).

Background:

The Health Care Authority administers the Medicaid program which is a state-federal program that pays for health care for low-income state residents who meet certain eligibility criteria. Benefits under the program vary according to a person's eligibility category which is determined by several factors, including income, age, health condition, and disability status.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Hearing aid coverage is currently available for Medicaid clients who are 20 years old and younger once they have completed a hearing evaluation and received a referral for a hearing aid. In addition, adults who are enrolled for coverage through the Developmental Disability Administration at the Department of Social and Health Services may receive hearing aids. Coverage includes new monaural or binaural hearing aids, as well as ear molds, replacement parts, and repairs. Hearing aid coverage had been available for adults enrolled in Medicaid until the 2011-13 Operating Budget eliminated the benefit.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

By January 1, 2018, the Health Care Authority must provide coverage for hearing aids and related equipment and services to Medicaid enrollees who are 21 years old and over. For persons with an average decibel loss of 45 or more in his or her better ear, coverage consists of the purchase of one new monaural hearing aid every five years, including ear molds and connecting wires, and a prefitting evaluation and follow up appointments. For hearing aids that are lost, damaged, or need maintenance, coverage also includes replacement, repair, reprogramming, and rental. In addition, an enrollee may receive repair, maintenance, and replacement parts for cochlear implant devices and bone conduction devices.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill eliminates coverage for a second hearing aid for adults on medical assistance.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) There are as many as 650,000 people in this state who are in need of hearing aids and are not able to get them. Many young people who need hearing aids fall between the cracks. Not everybody is in a place where they can afford hearing aids and that creates a health disparity. The number one question that people who are hard of hearing ask is how to afford hearing aids. This bill was drafted to be as close as possible to the benefit that existed prior to the budget reduction. This bill will provide a new benefit to give two hearing aids to people with greater hearing loss in both ears. Only a small number of adults are able to pay for hearing aids. There are only a few places that can provide hearing aids to low-income people and this bill is necessary to fill the need. Medicare does not cover hearing aids. This is a relatively small amount compared to the total Medicaid spending. This bill will put Washington in line with approximately half of the other states.

This is the number one issue for senior councils. This gives many low-income seniors the ability to hear what everybody else is saying. Hearing aids connect people to the world. This is a life-saving, life-changing technology that is badly needed by a good number of people in Washington. The implications of hearing loss impact the quality of life. Studies show that hearing loss leads to social isolation, depression, increased risk of dementia, and strains in relationships. As hearing loss progresses, a person's earning potential and years of employment decrease, resulting in a cost to society and the economy. Hearing aids reduce the burden to caregivers through enhanced communication. Sometimes hearing loss is seen as dementia.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative McBride, prime sponsor; Diane Thompson, Karen Utter, Kelly Tremblay, and Cherri Perazolli, Hearing Loss Association of America; and Warren Weissman, Hearing, Speech, and Deaf Center.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.