**Let California Kids Hear Act (SB 635)**

**Executive Summary:**

The Let California Kids Hear Act (SB 635) aims to mandate health insurance coverage for hearing aids and related services for deaf and hard-of-hearing children in California. The Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) system recommends that children should be screened by one month, diagnosed by three months, and start intervention by six months – known as the "1:3:6" guidelines. Aligned with these guidelines, the act seeks to increase access to early intervention which improves outcomes for affected children. Compliance with these guidelines not only helps a child meet their developmental milestones during a critical window of development, but also reduces taxpayer costs. Despite the critical importance of these measures, many families still struggle to afford hearing aids for their children, hindering access to necessary care. The Let California Kids Hear Act addresses this issue by improving access to audiological care and services, thereby directly benefiting deaf and hard-of-hearing children across the state.

**Description of the Problem:**

Approximately 1 to 3 per 1,000 infants in the United States are born with a permanent hearing loss in one or both ears (CDC, 2019). In California, 1,000 infants per year are born with hearing loss. Undetected and untreated hearing loss can put children at risk for delays in speech and language development, academic achievement, and social and emotional development (Davis, Elfenbein & Bentler, 1986). These outcomes can be significantly improved by early diagnosis of hearing loss and timely intervention. (Yoshinaga-Itano et al., 1988). Further, the CDC estimates it costs taxpayers more than 1 million dollars per child who does not receive early intervention for special education, medical complications, and unemployment. Further, the California Legislative Analyst’s Office reports that the state spends approximately $400 million annual educating deaf and hard of hearing children. Some of these costs could be mitigated if the child had access to early intervention.

The problem addressed by the "Let California Kids Hear Act" lies in the insufficient access to hearing healthcare services for children across California. In 1998, California established the Newborn Hearing Screening program, recognizing the urgency to screen newborns for hearing loss, leading to timely diagnosis and intervention. Despite the critical importance of early intervention for children with hearing loss, numerous barriers exist, hindering timely diagnosis and treatment. These barriers include lack of routine screening programs in educational and healthcare settings, timely access to a pediatric hearing healthcare provider due to historically low reimbursement rates, and high costs associated with hearing aids due to limited insurance coverage . As a result, many children with hearing loss face challenges in academic performance, social integration, mental health and overall well-being. The "Let California Kids Hear Act" seeks to address these disparities and ensure that all children in California have equitable access to essential hearing healthcare services, thus mitigating the negative impacts of hearing loss and fostering a supportive environment for affected children to thrive.

Less than 9% of health plans in California cover hearing aids for children. Over 30 states mandate hearing aid coverage for children in commercial health plans and/or the essential health benefit state exchange. California does not. This leaves many California families without coverage for hearing healthcare. If a child is diagnosed with hearing loss that warrants intervention, families may be required to go into debt, delay necessary treatment, or forgo treatment as a whole. The Let California Kids Hear Act would ensure that families have access to affordable and comprehensive hearing healthcare which will lead to improved outcomes for children with hearing loss.

In September 2023, the state legislature passed the Let California Kids Hear Act with unanimous support. However, in October 2023, Governor Newsom announced he had vetoed the act, a devastating decision for many California families. We urge the legislature to put this bill back onto Governor Newsom’s desk.

**Proposed Solution:**

In 2019, the California legislature previously passed the Let California Kids Hear Act to tackle pediatric hearing health concerns. However, instead of enacting the bill, the Administration proposed the Hearing Aid Assistance Coordination Program (HACCP). Despite this alternative, administrative hurdles, budget limitations, and historically low reimbursement rates hampered its effectiveness, resulting in only a small fraction of eligible children receiving assistance. While underscoring the significance of addressing pediatric hearing loss, the act also underscores the necessity for more robust solutions, potentially including insurance mandates, to ensure comprehensive support for affected children. Georgia attempted to initiate a similar program as the HACCP; however, faced similar challenges as California which led to ultimately passing a mandate in 2018. The most effective solution to supporting early access to hearing healthcare is implementing an insurance mandate, as described by the Let California Kids Hear Act.

**Conclusion:**

The Let California Kids Hear Act presents a pivotal legislative initiative aimed at addressing the pressing issue of pediatric hearing loss in the state. By proposing mandatory health insurance coverage for hearing aids and associated services for deaf and hard-of-hearing children, the act seeks to ensure fair access to essential resources. Aligned with the "1:3:6" guidelines, which prioritize early screening and intervention, the act underscores the crucial need for prompt identification and treatment of hearing impairments. Through early intervention, the act not only aims to improve outcomes for affected children but also holds promise in potentially reducing long-term costs for taxpayers linked to untreated hearing loss. Additionally, recognizing the financial strain many families face in covering hearing aid expenses, the legislation aims to alleviate this barrier and enhance access to audiological care. Through these holistic measures, the "Let California Kids Hear Act" endeavors to cultivate a more inclusive and supportive environment for deaf and hard-of-hearing children statewide, ultimately paving the way for improved outcomes and brighter futures for all.

**References:**

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