

California State Senate

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TRANSPORTATION

February 3, 2025

Mary Watanabe, Director
California Department of Managed Health Care
980 9th Street, Suite 500
Sacramento, CA 95814-2725

Dear Director Watanabe:

As members of the Senate Health Committee, we are keenly interested in the process currently underway to update California's essential health benefits (EHB) benchmark plan. We understand the importance of this process and wish you and the department well as you make the difficult decisions that lie ahead.

Each of the new benefits proposed are undoubtedly deserving of inclusion to one degree or another, but we are aware that regulations, as well as limited resources, preclude the addition of every proposed benefit into the new benchmark plan. As previously mentioned, while tough decisions lie ahead, we believe one proposed benefit demands inclusion above all others – the Hearing Exam and Hearing Aids benefit. We urge you to include this benefit in the new benchmark plan, especially since this benefit includes hearing aids for children.

Senate Republicans have long advocated for improved children's access to hearing aids. In 2022, we demanded the State Department of Health Care Services improve the performance of the Hearing Aid Coverage for Children Program, which sadly is still underperforming (only 441 children have received hearing aids as of November 2024). We also supported SB 635 (Menjivar) of 2023, the Let California Kids Hear Act, which Governor Newsom vetoed. While not a silver bullet, we believe including the proposed hearing aid benefit in the new benchmark plan will improve hearing aid access for middle-class children. (As you know, low-income children already receive these services through Medi-Cal or the California Children's Services programs.)

Please know we do not make this request lightly. We realize adding benefits to a new benchmark plan has the potential to increase premiums paid by consumers, but we believe the price paid by hearing-impaired children who cannot access hearing aids will be even higher.

In summary, we again urge you to include a hearing aid benefit in the new benchmark plan, and thank you for your serious consideration of our request. Should you have any questions, please contact Joe Parra at (916) 651-1501.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Suzette Martinez Valladares". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Suzette" being more prominent.

Suzette Martinez Valladares
Vice Chair, Senate Health Committee

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Shannon Grove". The script is elegant and cursive, with the first name "Shannon" being more prominent.

Shannon Grove
Member, Senate Health Committee