



*Testimony presented by Susie Ternes, Au.D., CCC-A, Executive Director of the Kansas Speech-Language-Hearing Association to the House Health and Human Services Committee re: HB 2195*

February 13, 2017

Dear Chairman Hawkins and Members of the Committee,

**The Kansas State Speech-Language-Hearing Association, KSHA, supports the passage of HB 2195.** This bill is the product of recommendations made from the Special Committee on Organization of Public Health Boards and is based on their findings and analysis in December 2016.

I represent KSHA as its Executive Director and a practicing audiologist at Via Christi Hospital in Wichita. KSHA is a professional membership organization made up of about 1000 speech-language pathologists and audiologists. As you may know, audiologists are doctoral-level medical professionals who specialize in the diagnosis and treatment of hearing loss and balance disorders. Our scope of practice, as defined by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and State of Kansas law includes the fitting and dispensing of hearing aids.

Audiologists are licensed to practice by KDADS, the Kansas Department of Aging & Disability Services. The majority of audiologists practicing in the state of Kansas fit hearing aids and therefore must **also** hold a license from the Kansas Board of Examiners in Fitting and Dispensing of Hearing Instruments (the hearing aid dispensing license). As an audiologist who dispenses hearing aids, I personally hold both the Audiology license (from KDADS) and the Hearing Aid Dispensing license (from the Board of Hearing Aid Examiners).

Another profession- that of Hearing Instrument Specialists- also must hold the hearing aid dispensing license. These are individuals who fit hearing aids, but do not hold an Audiology degree.

### **Rationale for Support of HB2195**

HB 2195 would transfer the duties and powers of the free-standing Kansas Board of Hearing Aid Examiners to KDADS, but would leave the Hearing Aid Board (comprised of five members) intact, enabling it to act in an advisory capacity to the Secretary of KDADS.

Reasons for supporting this move are as follows:

- 1) **Consumer protection.** The primary reason licensing boards exist is to protect the consumer. This bill would facilitate better protection for consumers with hearing loss in the state of Kansas.
  - a. When a consumer is fit with hearing aids and is not happy with the service provided, who should he/she contact? KDADS to file a complaint against the audiologist? Or the Kansas Board of Hearing Aid Examiners? Audiologists are licensed by both boards in this state, which is very confusing to consumers. Because both Boards deal with similar issues (hearing healthcare), it only makes sense that they would be under the same umbrella agency (KDADS). This would be more efficient and more straightforward to the consumers of hearing healthcare.

- b. When a consumer wishes to file a complaint regarding the fitting of hearing aids, he/she would encounter significant challenges when determining who to contact and how to contact them. This is NOT good consumer protection. A Google search with the terms “How do I file a complaint against hearing aid dispenser in Kansas?” directs users to KDADS website (rather than the Board of Hearing Aid Examiners, which has no website). When KDADS receives these calls, they have to refer them to a different place, and cannot take the complaint. Other states’ websites include information on how to file a complaint, or at least how to contact the state’s Hearing Aid Board. Ours does not.
  - c. If the Board of Hearing Aid Examiners was moved under KDADS, as this bill would accomplish, consumers could easily inquire about the status of a licensee. It is in the best interest of the consumer to have readily available information about a health professional’s license. It is quite convenient to access the state’s website, type in a health professional’s name, and discover the following information: whether the person holds a current license, how long he/she has been licensed, and if any disciplinary action has been taken against the licensee. Currently, the Board of Hearing Aid Examiners has no such capability. This lack of transparency is a disservice to consumers. In addition, potential employers of hearing instrument specialists who wish to check the status of a hearing aid dispenser’s license cannot readily do so, which delays the hiring process. I receive calls at the Kansas Speech-Language-Hearing Association on a regular basis asking me to verify a hearing aid license. Obviously, I cannot do this, and I provide the contact information for the Board of Hearing Aid Examiners. Consumers are entitled to simple and quick access to this information, and the proposed change would reduce the workload of those who have to look up and verify this information. KDADS already has a wonderful system in place for this, which it uses for the other professions it licenses, and this system could be adapted for hearing aid licensees.
  - d. The Board of Hearing Aid Examiners has one part-time employee who works limited hours for the Board and is based out of Garnett, KS. In contrast, KDADS is fully staffed with several full-time employees and their office is open Monday through Friday during regular business hours. KDADS also has walk-in hours from 9am to 4pm, during which questions can be answered. Because of the increased staffing and an easily accessible and publicized location in Topeka, consumers can easily connect with the KDADS office.
- 2) **Better service for licensees.** Because of the part-time staffing of the Board of Hearing Aid Examiners, licensees and those who wish to become licensed may not receive timely answers to their questions. They have to wait for a return phone call. In contrast, KDADS is available Monday through Friday from 8am-5pm.
- a. In addition, the way the Board of Hearing Aid Examiners handles license renewal is outdated. Modern licensing agencies have an online renewal process, during which a licensee can quickly renew their license, submit required documentation, pay their renewal fees with a credit card, and print their license. The current mechanism for renewing the hearing aid license is on paper, through the mail, paid for by checks or money orders only. Weeks later, the license is received in the mail. KDADS already has online license renewal for the professions it oversees. I can tell you from personal experience that the KDADS renewal process takes less than five minutes and can accept credit card payment, with your license verification immediately available.
  - b. If I were unhappy with the way KDADS handles my Audiology license, I would certainly not be advocating for KDADS to also handle my hearing aid dispensing license. KDADS provides quality service to its licensees. In my position at KSHA, I have many interactions

with professionals who are licensed through KDADS (nearly 1000 of our members are), and none have expressed dissatisfaction with our licensing Board.

- c. Furthermore, KDADS utilizes their Advisory Boards in a way that benefits both professionals and consumers. For example, the Audiology/Speech-Language-Pathology Board meets regularly, under the supervision of KDADS, and issues of concern are brought up for discussion. KDADS appreciates and takes into account the professional opinions of their Board members before making decisions, taking action, or changing a process. I am quite confident that, should this bill be passed, KDADS would continue their track record by relying on the knowledge and expertise of the Hearing Aid Board for guidance.
- d. For individuals who wish to obtain their hearing aid license, having information about how to become a hearing instrument specialist/dispensing audiologist on the KDADS website would be very helpful. At this time, because the Board of Hearing Aid Examiners does not have a website, this information is not available online. In other states, an individual can go to the state's website, learn about the requirements to become a hearing instrument specialist, and even download an application for a license. Other states also allow you to register for the hearing instrument exam online, or at least find out the dates, location, and cost of testing. Individuals cannot do this in Kansas. A phone call is required and forms must be sent out. It is an antiquated system. Keeping things the way they are delays entry into the profession of hearing instrument dispensing. If KDADS oversaw the licensure process, this information and these forms could easily be accessed online, making it faster, more efficient, and streamlining the licensure process.

Briefly, I would like to point out that passing this bill does **NOT**...

- a. Put hearing instrument specialists out of business nor threaten their ability to become licensed. Those who are currently practicing will not lose their license. Those who are interested in obtaining a hearing aid license will continue to be able to do so. This bill IN NO WAY restricts individuals practicing in this field.
- b. Affect consumers' access to receiving hearing healthcare from an audiologist or a hearing instrument specialist. Consumers will continue to receive hearing healthcare from the professional they choose.
- c. Impose increased cost to the State. In fact, there is a potential for cost savings over time.

**In summary, it is in the best interest of the estimated 600,000 Kansans with hearing loss that HB 2195 be passed.** Consumer protection is of the utmost concern, and this bill would improve oversight of the professionals who fit and dispense hearing instruments and would improve the service received by licensees of the Board of Hearing Aid Examiners. I am happy to address any questions Committee members may have. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony.

Sincerely,

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Executive Director

Debra Burnett, Ph.D., CCC-SLP  
President of KSHA