

Senate Bill 331

Let California Kids Hear Act of 2026

Senator Caroline Menjivar (D – San Fernando Valley)

SUMMARY

SB 331, the Let California Kids Hear Act of 2026, requires large group health plans in California to cover hearing aids and services for children under 21, addressing a developmental emergency.

PROBLEM

Experts agree that pediatric hearing loss is considered a developmental emergency requiring timely intervention to prevent permanent delays.¹ These preventable consequences are not only devastating for the child and family; they are costly to society. Since private health insurance plans are not required to cover hearing aids for kids, about 9% of enrollees aged 0-20 in California have some coverage.² The lack of comprehensive coverage can make care unaffordable and leave children without access to hearing aids and services that support their development.

BACKGROUND

More than 35 states already require some level of pediatric hearing aid coverage. 30 states have mandates in their private markets, 29 states include hearing aids in their state exchange Essential Health Benefits, and 24 states cover children's hearing aids in both markets.³

In 2019, the Legislature unanimously passed AB 598 (Bloom) to establish commercial insurance coverage for children's hearing aids. Instead of signing the mandate, the Administration pursued a government-administered alternative through the Hearing Aid Coverage for Children Program (HACCP). The program was launched by the Department of Health Care Services on July 1, 2021. The issue with this program, however, was that a limited number of hearing aids were distributed, and the administration of the program was higher than the cost of services delivered to the children.⁴

In 2023, the Legislature again passed SB 635 (Menjivar) with bipartisan support, requiring commercial insurance coverage for pediatric hearing aids. That bill was vetoed due to concerns regarding potential state defrayal exposure associated with a

wider Essential Health Benefits benchmark expansion that included children in the exchange market.

At the same time, the HACCP approach has not delivered on its promise to families. Since 2021, California has allocated more than \$30 million to HACCP while serving fewer than 300 children.⁵ Direct service funding has remained largely unspent, provider participation remains limited, administrative barriers persist, and thousands of California children still lack meaningful access to care.

In 2025, California sought to address this issue through a broader Essential Health Benefits benchmark update championed by AB 224 (Bonta, Chapter 680, Statutes of 2025) and SB 62 (Menjivar, Chapter 739, Statutes of 2025), which included hearing aid coverage and other benefits. However, evolving federal rules and expanded defrayal exposure have stalled that effort.

SOLUTION

SB 331, the LCKH Act, would mandate coverage in large group health plans to ensure that children receive timely access to pediatric hearing aids. This will, in turn, lessen the burden on HACCP to focus on serving children outside the large-group health market.

This bill would reduce barriers to time-sensitive care and provide the treatment needed for the thousands of California families currently without affordable coverage for their child's hearing aids. Coverage of hearing aids by health insurance plans is a permanent solution that provides timely treatment of pediatric hearing loss.

STATUS

Amended - June 1, 2026

SUPPORT

Let California Kids Hear (Co-Sponsor)
Children Now (Co-Sponsor)
California Children's Hospital Association
California School-Based Health Alliance
Children Now

¹ Bush ML, Kaufman MR, McNulty BN. Disparities in access to pediatric hearing health care. *Curr Opin Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg*. 2017 Oct;25(5):359-364. doi: 10.1097/MOO.0000000000000388. PMID: 28665808; PMCID: PMC5973811.

² <https://www.chbrp.org/sites/default/files/bill-documents/SB635/Abbreviated%20Analysis%20of%20SB%20635%20Hearing%20Aids%20FINAL%20060923.pdf>

³ <https://letcakidshear.com/facts/state-details/>

⁴ [sub-3-agenda-archive.pdf](https://www.dhcs.ca.gov/data-statistics/dhcs-data-statistics-reports/local-assistance-estimates/)

⁵ <https://www.dhcs.ca.gov/data-statistics/dhcs-data-statistics-reports/local-assistance-estimates/>

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