

February 21, 2025

To Chairman Marvin Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Victor Bettencourt, and I am the father of a five-year-old boy who was born profoundly deaf. I am writing to ask you to provide stable, core funding for the Rhode Island Auditory-Oral Program by supporting H7011. The outcome of this bill will determine whether our son can continue receiving the support he needs to access his education.

When our son received cochlear implants, it did not “fix” his deafness. It gave him access to sound, but he still has a disability that requires specialized educational support. His hearing did not begin at birth. He had to learn how to listen. He had to learn how to understand speech through technology. That process requires professionals who understand hearing devices, language development, classroom acoustics, and the fatigue that comes with listening all day through equipment.

He does not fit neatly into either the School for the Deaf or a mainstream classroom. The Rhode Island School for the Deaf provides an excellent ASL-centered education, but that is not our son’s communication mode. At the same time, placing him into a typical mainstream classroom without structured support would not meet his needs. He can hear, but not like his peers. Background noise, fast classroom discussion, and missed instructions are daily challenges. Without specialized teachers of the deaf familiar with hearing technology, in-class support, and speech-language professionals experienced in developing listening and spoken language skills in children with cochlear implants, he risks missing instruction and falling behind.

The Auditory-Oral Program exists because this group of children exists. For twenty years, Rhode Island has recognized that students who use hearing technology and spoken language represent a distinct educational population. The program provides early intervention, school-based services, and statewide outreach so that these children can access instruction alongside their peers. It fills the gap between an ASL-centered school and unsupported mainstream placement.

What concerns me most is the instability of funding. This program should not rely on fluctuating tuition or temporary allocations. School districts are legally obligated to provide appropriate services, whether this program is funded or not. If the state does not fund it in a coordinated way, the responsibility and cost simply shift to individual districts, often in less efficient and less effective ways. Sustainable funding supports the state’s ongoing commitment to providing appropriate services to students with hearing loss.

We have worked so hard, in partnership with our son’s RI Auditory Oral Program teachers, to give our son every opportunity and support - and he is thriving! We are asking you to ensure that he, and other children like him, do not lose access to the specialized support that makes that success possible.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Victor Bettencourt

23 Walker Rd
Foster, RI 02825