

February 8, 2017

Dear Chair Greenlick and Members of the House Health Care Committee,

I am writing to you in support of HB 2723 which prohibits exclusion of hippotherapy from services provided in medical assistance.

My reasons for supporting this bill are very personal and I'd like to share them with you.

I am the mother to a 17-year-old daughter, Jenna, who was born with a unique chromosomal disorder diagnosed at the age of 3 years. Her disability covers a variety of issues including but not limited to: intellectual and developmental disabilities; speech intelligibility; OCD's; sensory issues; low muscle tone; poor fine and gross motor skills; and foot and ankle weakness requiring customized supportive ankle and foot orthotics. Jenna faces never ending daily challenges which impact and limit her life greatly.

Because Jenna had a straightforward diagnosis, we were luckier than most, insurance could not deny Jenna's need for treatment in physical, occupational and speech therapies. When Jenna was about 5 years old, we were introduced to Forward Stride through her developmental pediatrician as a possible alternate therapy to the traditional ones she was receiving. Her doctor felt that Jenna's outgoing personality and deep love for animals would be a perfect match and be highly motivating. After investigating what hippotherapy was and talking to insurance, we found it was not a coverable option. To insurance it was NOT a therapy. I never considered it again.

Jenna continued her traditional insurance covered therapies but we also made a family decision to personally invest in therapeutic horseback riding for Jenna at Forward Stride in a group setting with other children with special needs. The benefits were too great to ignore.

At Forward Stride, Jenna would learn to ride a horse in a safe setting and gain some of the benefits of a horse's movement for strengthening her core body. Just

through riding lessons, we saw how her communication skills grew from the conversations she had with her instructor, peers, side walkers and even the horse that Jenna was challenged to give direction to. Jenna had so much she wanted to learn and talk about. For example, helping to ready the horse for lesson, properly feeding it carrots and apples at the end of a lesson, assisting with grooming, visiting the other horses and learning about them created so much motivation each week to go, learn more and work harder.

Jenna continued for many years riding at Forward Stride but it ended abruptly, about 4 years ago, due to divorce and her father's sudden unemployment. Alone, I could no longer afford the high expense of paying for private lessons. It was a big loss for Jenna and as she got older the traditional therapies could not offer more improvement.

Traditional therapy places are geared for younger children. Her age group is seen as having reached their potential causing services to dwindle if you are not dealing with an extreme physical disability. Even therapies provided through the school district end because if the kids are mobile and capable of navigating school, then they no longer have a need and occupational and physical therapies are no longer a part of an IEP. Basically, Jenna has "aged out" of therapy but not the need for the right kind of therapies.

We had a period after our insurance ended, and before I found employment (I was a stay at home mom for 19 years) when Jenna became part of the Oregon Health Plan. Hearing that this bill was tied to OHP from State Rep Janeen Sollman, I got a glimmer of hope that Jenna may finally get the opportunity to participate in hippotherapy as a covered benefit at a time when she needs it more than ever.

Like most teens, Jenna doesn't actively play and exercise the way she did when she was a younger. Life becomes more sedentary due to the types of activities she now likes to do. Her foot and ankle issues have worsened so long periods of standing and walking are difficult. Her balance and coordination, due to low muscle tone and greater body weight, make her more vulnerable to falls. Her motivation for physical activity has greatly diminished because nothing really interests her, because it is too hard and she doesn't feel good at it. She isn't

finding much success in anything physical. This is impacting her over all healthiness.

The one thing that hasn't changed is her love for animals. For now, her favorite and most motivating thing to do is visit the Oregon Humane Society almost every weekend to see the dogs and cats. Jenna also still asks when she will get to ride a horse again. I don't have an answer but I do know she would greatly benefit from hippotherapy more now than ever because it would be highly motivating and physically challenging.

If Jenna could participate in hippotherapy I see her being very motivated because of her connection to and love of animals. I see her body being challenged differently by being on a moving horse. I see her continuing to improve her listening skills by having to follow directions and be on a moving horse. I see her improving problem solving skills because she would have to push herself beyond her level of comfort again while on a moving horse. I see her improving her communication skills by working with new people who are requiring perhaps difficult things for her to do while on a moving horse.

If Jenna had the opportunity to participate in hippotherapy, I see new growth opportunities, physically and mentally, that have felt stagnant in her for some time. I also see hippotherapy as a benefit at time in her life when there are fewer gains, if any, from outgrown traditional types of therapies. Hippotherapy has no age barriers and for a teen it is much "cooler" to do and adds a little something to brag about when life feels more limited life than their peers.

Thank you for listening to my story and how I feel this bill would greatly benefit one Oregon family.

Warm regards,

Karen Bomar

Portland, OR