

Health and Human Services Committee March 13, 2018

RIEPE: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Health and Human Services Committee. And today we're going to have a confirmation hearing on Stacie Ray. Before I do that I'll introduce myself. I'm Merv Riepe; I'm chairman of the Health and Human Services Committee. And the committee members are made up of senators and two staff people. And I'm going to ask the gentleman on my far right to introduce himself and who he represents.

KOLTERMAN: [00:00:25] Senator Mark Kolterman, District 24: Seward, York, and Polk Counties.

ERDMAN: [00:00:29] Steve Erdman, District 47, which is ten counties in the Panhandle.

KRISTEN STIFFLER: [00:00:33] Kristen Stiffler, legal counsel.

WILLIAMS: [00:00:36] Matt Williams, Legislative District 36: Dawson, Custer, and the north part of Buffalo County.

LINEHAN: [00:00:42] Hi. Lou Ann Linehan, District 39, which is Elkhorn, Waterloo, and Valley in Douglas County.

TYLER MAHOOD: [00:00:48] And Tyler Mahood, committee clerk.

RIEPE: [00:00:50] We also have one of our wonderful pages back here who is absolutely critical in terms of the stuff that we do in this committee. We appreciate it very much. With that, I would like-- we may have some senators that will still be joining us. If we do, we will proceed right along in the interest of time of everyone. So I would like to move forward with the confirmation and see if Stacie Ray-- I believe she is here-- if you would come forward, please-- and up here, right on the mike.

STACIE RAY: [00:01:22] Right.

RIEPE: [00:01:26] And if you're--

STACIE RAY: [00:01:27] Good afternoon.

RIEPE: [00:01:27] Good afternoon. If you would be kind enough to state your name and spell it for the record, please.

STACIE RAY: [00:01:32] Yes. My name is Stacie Ray, S-t-a-c-i-e, Ray, R-a-y.

RIEPE: [00:01:37] Thank you.

STACIE RAY: [00:01:38] Um-hum.

RIEPE: [00:01:38] And proceed forward. Tell us, please, your interest in the Hearing Committee.

STACIE RAY: [00:01:44] Yes, I have been on the board for two years now and I feel like we are, you know, making great progress. My passion in life is to help individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing, and this is a great means to do it, through serving on the board of the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

RIEPE: [00:02:08] What was your motivation?

STACIE RAY: [00:02:08] Actually, my motivation started many years ago. I have a son who's deaf, I have a husband who's hard of hearing, and I am now a professor at the University of Nebraska teaching students audiology. And my focus is helping low-income individuals, grant them access to services across the state of Nebraska.

RIEPE: [00:02:31] Did your engagement in the audiology business, did that precede your birth of your son, or--

STACIE RAY: [00:02:38] Actually, that was, that was after. I knew what I wanted to do, and the way to get there was to continue through my education and get my doctorate and get into something like a university setting to be able to build some programs that would help the individuals who don't have access because of income restrictions.

RIEPE: [00:03:01] OK. I'd like to ask you if there's one thing that you feel that has been accomplished in your time on this board and something that you would like, one-- just one thing-- and then one thing, maybe, that you'd like to work on or accomplish into the future.

STACIE RAY: [00:03:14] Sure, sure. Well, I think as we've worked together over the last two years since I've been there, I think there's been many accomplishments. One of them is, is trying to get more awareness of the impact hearing loss has on the community and across the state and across the world, actually. I work not only here in Nebraska but I do work in Nicaragua. And just being able to, to bridge the resources that we have and looking at other states and how they work and being able to share those resources, I think, builds just a better community. So I think we've done some great things there. One of the things I would like to further work on is the legislative bill that we're trying to get in with close cap-- or open captioning at movie theaters. A lot of people struggle being able to go to movies and understand the dialogue, and I'd like to continue our efforts in that area so that we have equal access for all.

RIEPE: [00:04:25] Do you see that as a voluntary, or are you thinking this should be something that would be mandatory?

STACIE RAY: [00:04:31] You know, we've been going back and forth with that, with that. I have a feeling if it's voluntary, it will not happen. And I know Hawaii has done mandatory for quite a while and has had great success with it. So I would like to see it go to the mandatory level.

RIEPE: [00:04:50] OK. I want to see if there are questions from the committee members. I can't imagine going to a movie if you live in Hawaii, but-- [LAUGHTER] Are there any other questions? Do you have questions of us? We can open that up, too.

STACIE RAY: [00:05:08] No, I don't believe I do. I just want to tell you that I really appreciate being able to serve on this board. I think we're doing some, some fabulous things for our community, and I appreciate all your efforts and support.

RIEPE: [00:05:22] How's your son and husband doing?

STACIE RAY: [00:05:23] They're doing, they're doing well. My son is actually now 28 years old, so he's kind of on his own, but doing great.

RIEPE: [00:05:33] Has he benefited from technology?

STACIE RAY: [00:05:34] He has, actually. He was the very first cochlear implant recipient in Lincoln Public Schools. And now you see a lot of them. So that was an interesting, interesting venture, I should say, because nobody even knew what cochlear implants were that many years ago. So I hope to think we kind of paved the way a little bit in the school systems being able to provide different ways of being able to teach students that are deaf but now have some technology that is helping them get more into the hearing world as well.

RIEPE: [00:06:13] How old was he when he received his implant?

STACIE RAY: [00:06:14] He was three, just going on age four.

RIEPE: [00:06:19] So he got that before he really start school, other than preschool?

STACIE RAY: [00:06:22] Well, he started school on his second birthday because he was in the Deaf Ed Program.

RIEPE: [00:06:30] OK.

STACIE RAY: [00:06:30] Um-hum. I remember clearly, them picking him up on this big yellow bus in front of the house and going, oh my gosh, he can't even carry a backpack. And now he's 28. How does that happen?

RIEPE: [00:06:42] Yeah, quickly.

STACIE RAY: [00:06:45] Very quickly.

RIEPE: [00:06:45] Very quickly. Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: [00:06:45] Thank you, Chairman Riepe. And thank you, very much for being here today.

STACIE RAY: [00:06:49] You bet.

LINEHAN: [00:06:49] It's nice to have you in person. Can you-- when you say in parts of Nebraska where they can't get access or they need more access, can you give us some examples?

STACIE RAY: [00:06:58] Right. So as most of you probably are aware, because I'm sure all of you have, have dealt with someone with hearing loss, it's very prevalent. We're looking at about 40-466 million people on this planet now; the stats just came out. So we have, you know, thousands of people in Nebraska that need access to technology, hearing aids. Unfortunately they're very, very expensive. So you're looking at an average of over \$4,000 per pair, and they last about five to seven years. So my focus has been on working with hearing aid banks. So the Barkley Memorial Center at the University has been working with Sertoma Hearing Aid Bank. We started that with them in '81. And from there there's been other hearing aid banks started. One I started for children, and that provides brand-new technology for any child in the state of Nebraska who doesn't have health insurance that covers it and meets some financial requirements. So we fit over, probably over 650 brand-new hearing aids all over the state of Nebraska. And that's where I feel we would like to take this is, you know, hearing aid legislation, being able to have it mandatory for third party reimbursement for hearing aids because if a child can't hear, they can't learn. If they can't learn, they're going to have an impact on us as a community. And that is my true passion is knowing now we can, we can catch these kids very, very early on. We are able to screen them shortly after birth, before they leave the hospital. We're getting them diagnosed early on. But if the parents can't afford

the devices that connect them to society, then they're going to get delayed. And if they get delayed, it's very hard to catch up.

LINEHAN: [00:09:19] So are the, are the-- I can't say the word-- the implant-- the--

STACIE RAY: [00:09:25] The cochlear implants?

LINEHAN: [00:09:26] Cochlear. Are they covered by Medicaid or the CHIP program?

STACIE RAY: [00:09:30] I believe they are, and--

LINEHAN: [00:09:33] So it's third party providers--

STACIE RAY: [00:09:35] So Medicaid does pay for hearing aids.

LINEHAN: [00:09:39] OK.

STACIE RAY: [00:09:39] But anything above that poverty line, it's out of pocket for parents. I actually started what's called HearU Nebraska, and that's what helps pay for them. And it was, you know, one of those days when my child was diagnosed. He was 17 months old and I was a young mother going to school, working part time, and I had to take out a loan with interest. And it took me years to pay it off. And by that time he was already in cochlear implants. So I didn't want any parent to have to struggle with the idea of, do we purchase hearing aids for our child or do we put food on the table? So that's what, what we cover--

LINEHAN: [00:10:25] OK.

STACIE RAY: [00:10:26] -- are those devices.

LINEHAN: [00:10:27] OK. So-- but the CHIP and Medicaid kids are covered?

STACIE RAY: [00:10:30] CHIP and Medicaid kids are covered.

LINEHAN: [00:10:34] So then--

STACIE RAY: [00:10:34] That is correct.

LINEHAN: [00:10:35] -- the other kids would be the ones that-- does private insurance not pay for them?

STACIE RAY: [00:10:39] No.

LINEHAN: [00:10:39] OK.

STACIE RAY: [00:10:41] Private insurance does not pay for them. That's something that--

LINEHAN: [00:10:43] No private insurance or just some private insurance, because they don't always act alike?

STACIE RAY: [00:10:47] Most private insurance. It's very rare to find private insurance that covers hearing aids for children or for adults. But some states do have it mandated--

LINEHAN: [00:11:00] OK .

STACIE RAY: [00:11:00] -- that if a child is diagnosed and has a hearing loss, that the insurance company needs to pay for it. The problem is that a lot of the deductibles are \$5,000, \$10,000. So even if you have a good insurance-- which I have a good insurance-- but when my, my child was diagnosed, even if I had good insurance coverage, it would have gone toward my deductible. And it's one of those things that's really hard to manage when you have to do this every few years, and batteries and ear molds, so.

LINEHAN: [00:11:35] Thank you.

STACIE RAY: [00:11:36] You bet.

RIEPE: [00:11:38] Our insurance expert, Senator-- Senator Kolterman, please.

KOLTERMAN: [00:11:41] Thank you, Senator Riepe. Just a point of clarification: most policies do not cover, as you said.

STACIE RAY: [00:11:48] Um-hum.

KOLTERMAN: [00:11:48] However, there are more and more companies offering prescription glasses and hearing aids as an additional benefit you can buy.

STACIE RAY: [00:11:57] Um-hum.

KOLTERMAN: [00:11:57] But most of the people that aren't covered under Medicare and Medicaid do not get-- cochlear implants, though, if they're necessary--

STACIE RAY: [00:12:05] They are.

KOLTERMAN: [00:12:05] -- they are covered.

STACIE RAY: [00:12:05] Right, if they meet the FDA requirements--

KOLTERMAN: [00:12:08] Yeah.

STACIE RAY: [00:12:08] -- they're covered.

KOLTERMAN: [00:12:10] But the hearing aids themselves are not.

LINEHAN: [00:12:12] OK, but the implants are? I'm sorry.

KOLTERMAN: [00:12:14] In many cases they are.

LINEHAN: [00:12:17] OK. Thank you very much.

RIEPE: [00:12:18] Do you have any follow-up questions?

LINEHAN: [00:12:19] No.

RIEPE: [00:12:19] OK.

LINEHAN: [00:12:19] That helps.

RIEPE: [00:12:20] Senator Erdman.

ERDMAN: [00:12:21] Thank you, Senator Riepe. Thank you for coming. I have an unusual question. Maybe You can answer; if you can't that's fine. Why are those hearing aids so expensive?

STACIE RAY: [00:12:30] You know what, that is a great question. And if you ask the manufacturers of them, they're going to say it's because of all the research and development that has to go into them.

ERDMAN: [00:12:41] Well, years ago I had a cousin who worked in the post office for 30 years.

STACIE RAY: [00:12:45] Uh-huh.

ERDMAN: [00:12:46] And in the town where he was there were two hearing aid people, two companies, and when they shipped them by mail they insured them for \$350.

STACIE RAY: [00:12:55] Oh, wow.

ERDMAN: [00:12:56] Yeah, so he got hearing aids later and he paid the \$4,000. And he was wondering and asked the provider, if you insure them for \$350, why do I have to pay \$4,000?

STACIE RAY: [00:13:05] Um-hum.

ERDMAN: [00:13:05] And my question is, you know, the technology of today-- you buy a smartphone that can do a lot more than hearing aids do. There's a lot of things you can buy for less than \$4,000 that are required to do a lot more things than hearing aids. It always has baffled me that they're so expensive.

STACIE RAY: [00:13:21] Yes. And I think we are going to see a move into the cost going down. Actually our prices for premium technology where I work have gone down significantly because of the way we unbundle our prices. But there are, unfortunately, still those individuals and practices that that is their bread and butter. And, I mean, I have a completely different philosophy. It's like, how can we make things more efficient and effective, and how can we provide the opportunities for all individuals regardless of what their financial status is?

ERDMAN: [00:14:06] Thank you.

STACIE RAY: [00:14:07] So let's hope.

ERDMAN: [00:14:08] Yeah, thank you.

RIEPE: [00:14:09] I want to follow up on the same vein. I don't know whether you're-- have followed or are familiar with Senator, U.S. Senator Grassley--

STACIE RAY: [00:14:15] I don't know--

RIEPE: [00:14:15] -- who has pursued the idea of these costs, and his argument is, is that a hearing aid should be like going to, to Walgreens and being able to get a pair of reader glasses, that it might not be the world's most sophisticated, but you should be able to buy them off of a, the end of an aisle, you know, for--

STACIE RAY: [00:14:35] And I, I completely--

RIEPE: [00:14:35] -- for a very small amount of money.

STACIE RAY: [00:14:36] I completely disagree with that--

RIEPE: [00:14:40] OK.

STACIE RAY: [00:14:40] -- and the reason being is that many times what's going on with the auditory system is something medical in nature. So if it's something that they have a perforation, if they have an acoustic tumor, if they have anything like this and they're trying to get some devices, you're not going to be able to catch those medical things that's happening. It could just be impacted wax. We've seen that before, that people go and buy devices from Walgreens, or whatever, and put them in their ear and they come in-- it's like, this isn't working. Well, we look and it's because wax is impacted. They didn't even need that device. We've seen individuals that come in and they have tumors on their auditory nerve. We have people that buy hearing aids off the Internet, and you can't even hook them up to a computer to program them because they are from the Netherlands. So we can't even get into that software. So I do think that as far as prescriptive hearing aids, even if it's something that you do end up getting through Wal-Mart or Walgreens or whatever, I do think that the first line is you have to see someone who has knowledge about the auditory system to do the test to make sure that it isn't something that could be medically treated. Just like you do if you go get prescriptive glasses, you should get a prescription before you go pick up hearing aids because you don't want to do more damage to the system.

RIEPE: [00:16:15] I'll ask my mother-in-law; she knows everything [LAUGHTER].

LINEHAN: [00:16:21] I am one of those.

KOLTERMAN: [00:16:23] Well, I'd just like to comment. You work at the Beadle Center, don't you?

STACIE RAY: [00:16:29] I work at the Barkley Center.

KOLTERMAN: [00:16:30] The Barkley Center?

STACIE RAY: [00:16:32] Um-hum.

KOLTERMAN: [00:16:32] At the University of Nebraska?

STACIE RAY: [00:16:33] Yes.

KOLTERMAN: [00:16:33] For some reason, I want to call it the Beadle Center. But they do a wonderful job there.

STACIE RAY: [00:16:38] Thank you.

KOLTERMAN: [00:16:39] And my-- and they do-- they do state of the art testing and provide hearing aids when necessary. So thank you for that.

STACIE RAY: [00:16:46] You bet.

RIEPE: [00:16:48] Senator Erdman.

ERDMAN: [00:16:49] Senator Riepe. Your comment provoked another thought, or a comment, that I'd like to share. I am one of those Internet recipients--

STACIE RAY: [00:17:00] Um-hum.

ERDMAN: [00:17:00] -- and it is working quite well.

STACIE RAY: [00:17:01] Good.

ERDMAN: [00:17:02] But the requirement before you could get the hearing aid is you have to have a test.

STACIE RAY: [00:17:07] Absolutely.

ERDMAN: [00:17:09] And so I did the test--

STACIE RAY: [00:17:10] Good.

ERDMAN: [00:17:11] -- and I saved about \$3,000.

STACIE RAY: [00:17:13] You bet. You bet, and in those cases--

ERDMAN: [00:17:16] And that's exactly--

STACIE RAY: [00:17:17] -- that is where it's going the right way.

ERDMAN: [00:17:19] -- it was exactly the same hearing aid I would have bought back home, for \$3,000 less.

STACIE RAY: [00:17:22] That's great. That's great, and I think we're going to see more and more of that.

RIEPE: [00:17:27] OK, other questions? Senator Williams, please.

WILLIAMS: [00:17:30] Thank you, Chairman Riepe. I have to ask this question. You said your husband had hearing loss. Is it the same hearing loss that my wife claims that I have? [LAUGHTER] Or is it a real--

RIEPE: [00:17:41] The husband?

WILLIAMS: [00:17:42] -- hearing loss?

STACIE RAY: [00:17:43] Well, it depends.

WILLIAMS: [00:17:44] See, I have these things, too, you know.

STACIE RAY: [00:17:47] Um-hum, it could be he has both [LAUGHTER].

WILLIAMS: [00:17:50] You don't need to answer that.

ERDMAN: [00:17:55] He has both. There's two kinds of hearing loss--

STACIE RAY: [00:17:56] Yes, he has both.

ERDMAN: [00:17:56] -- selective and otherwise.

RIEPE: [00:17:58] OK. Thank you very much.

STACIE RAY: [00:18:00] Absolutely.

RIEPE: [00:18:01] I'm going to ask-- are the-- our, kind of, crowd left. And so I think [INAUDIBLE] --

STACIE RAY: [00:18:05] We scared them away.

RIEPE: [00:18:07] Are there-- is there anyone that wants to speak in support [INAUDIBLE] --

_____:: [00:18:12] I mean, I support her, but--

RIEPE: [00:18:12] You need to come up to the mike.

_____:: [00:18:13] No, no, no, I--

WILLIAMS: [00:18:13] You don't need to.

RIEPE: [00:18:15] OK, good enough. Thank you.

ERDMAN: [00:18:18] Not that kind of support.

RIEPE: [00:18:22] OK, thank you. Are there any opponents? No. Are there any neutrals? No. So thank you very much.

STACIE RAY: [00:18:29] All right.

ERDMAN: [00:18:29] Thank you.

RIEPE: [00:18:29] We appreciate it very much. You're doing us-- we appreciate your service very much, as well.

STACIE RAY: [00:18:32] You bet, thank you. Appreciate your service as well.

RIEPE: [00:18:36] And you have, you have a, you have a good driving heart.

STACIE RAY: [00:18:38] All right. Thank you very much.

RIEPE: [00:18:39] Thank you.

STACIE RAY: [00:18:40] You guys take care.

RIEPE: [00:18:41] Is there any other business before-- ? We're-- this confirmation is completed. And thank you very much.