

Commentary
Speech, hearing workers could use legislative hand
By JUDITH KELLER
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For more than 75 years, May has been recognized as “Better Hearing and Speech Month” by the dedicated professionals who work to provide critical, life-changing help for the 49 million Americans of all ages and from all walks of life who struggle with some type of speech, language or hearing disorder. In Texas alone, it’s an estimated two million people.

Although our professions are difficult to define, the speech-language pathology and audiology scopes of practice cover a wide spectrum of communication disorders. We as professionals treat hearing loss, stuttering, social disorders, literacy problems, swallowing disorders, stroke recovery, dementia, brain injury, laryngectomy recovery, Parkinson’s disease, autism, balance disorders, auditory processing disorders, speech/sound problems — and much, much more.

Among our challenges is reaching out to these two million Texans, their families and their communities to build awareness about our profession and our valuable services. We strive to equip them with the resources to prevent or overcome these often physically and socially disabling communication disorders.

The Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association — nearly 5,000 members strong — proudly serves as the state’s recognized resource for speech-language pathologists, audiologists and Texans with communication disorders.

There are several pieces of legislation currently being considered by the Texas Legislature that could have a dramatic and positive impact on our current patients, our potential patients and our professions. They include:

- The requirement of a preseason cognitive-communicative assessment (primarily related to concussions) of all high school athletes engaged in contact sports, in order to help save lives and avoid brain injuries. This is based on the same model which requires all athletes to have physicals before they are cleared to play.
- The elimination of disparity and limitations within private health insurance that children and families experience when accessing speech, language and hearing services — mandating that insurance benefits should cover all conditions regardless of cause and should not be left to the interpretation of insurance companies.
- Loan repayment for graduate education of speech-language pathologists and audiologists employed in public schools, and doctoral faculty who teach in Texas college/university communication sciences and disorders (CSD) programs. This will encourage employment in Texas schools and subsequently help alleviate critical shortages.
- Pay increases and benefits equal to those given teachers for speech-language pathologists and audiologists employed in the public schools.

- □Liability exemption for licensed speech-language pathologists, audiologists and assistants who voluntarily provide health care services.

In every community across the state of Texas, there are poignant stories — particularly about children — who have made great strides due to speech-language pathologists and/or audiologists who have identified communication problems and worked to help these individuals conquer their disorders. It should be noted that nearly one out of ten children has a noticeable speech disorder by the first grade.

Yet we are hopeful on many fronts.

We are hopeful that high school administrators, athletic directors, coaches and parents will recognize the risks involved with contact sports and will support our proposed preventive testing — for the sake of the health and lives of our young athletes.

We are hopeful that families will receive more private insurance assistance, equipping them with the funds and tools for children, parents and grandparents to have access to the treatment that can enormously improve their quality of life.

We are hopeful that our state will assist communication sciences and disorders graduate students with loan repayments — a frequent obstacle for budding practitioners.

We are hopeful that public schools will attract and secure more speech-language pathologists and audiologists by offering salaries and benefits equal to those of teachers.

We are hopeful that with increased awareness of our professions, the number of untreated Texans will quickly decrease.

And as a whole, we are hopeful that dozens, hundreds, thousands more children and adults across the state will face and conquer their disorders with the help of Texas' passionate, dedicated speech-language pathologists and audiologists.

Keller is assistant professor at Texas Tech University's Department of Speech-Language-Hearing Services and president of TSHA, a professional membership organization that is the recognized resource in Texas for speech-language pathologists, audiologists and the citizens of Texas with communication disorders.

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