

HOUSE PROFESSIONAL LICENSURE COMMITTEE
INFORMATIONAL MEETING ON HOUSE BILL 1356
AUGUST 8, 2023
TESTIMONY: Jennifer Baer

Chairman Burns, Chairman Metzger, and members of the Pennsylvania House Licensure Committee:

My name is Jennifer Baer and my husband, Bryan Baer and I live with our four daughters in Houston, PA. I am writing today in support of House Bill 1356 which would License Professional Music Therapists. I am passionate about this subject due to the undeniable benefits my family has gained from Music Therapy over the last 16 years.

My testimony centers around our eldest daughter, Ella. At six months old, Ella was not sitting up on her own. At seven months old, she began having seizures and we made the call to Early Intervention. From nine months on, Ella had Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy, and a Developmental Specialist working with her and us in our home. We started private speech and OT when she was 2 ½ and that is also when we brought her to the children's developmental unit to get her diagnosed with Autism or PDD-NOS as it was called back then. That was a very difficult decision to come to. We knew that Ella had some type of genetic syndrome because of her global delays and genetic markers, but all of the testing that they were able to do came back as normal.

Meeting with the psychologist was terribly difficult. Here I was with this beautiful, little smiley 2 year old, nine months pregnant with our 2nd daughter and having to answer all of these horrid developmental questions...no, she doesn't do that, no, she can't do that, no, I don't let her even attempt to do that, no, no, no, not yet!!! I knew, if we were able to get an autism diagnosis then we could also get behavioral therapy started in the home. That is what we knew would be best for Ella and our family and soon to be little Grace. However, this was a terribly heart wrenching time of anger and denial and grieving. Every different, new diagnosis is. Every new doctor, new therapist, new program opens all of those emotional wounds up again because they all need to know Ella's story to develop a plan of care and treat her appropriately.

Ella is non-verbal and although she communicates some with sign language and also using her iPad, she is completely dependent on those around her. When we got the autism diagnosis, we were able to choose a local provider and get started with our first BSC, first notebook, and first TSS. We had a 40 hour/week prescription and that was

intense, but Ella made a lot of improvements. As a family, we learned a lot of different techniques to use with her at home, in school, and within our community.

In February 2008, when Ella was three, I saw a flyer for a special needs summer camp symposium at the mall. I didn't know if Ella was old enough for summer camp, but I was intrigued. I put the girls in the double stroller and headed to the Ross Park Mall, this is where I first learned about Wesley's Music Therapy program. I spoke with the director of the program, Katie Harrill and learned that Music Therapy for kids with autism was a very new idea at the time and they were just starting to have groups in the South Hills. I signed her right up! Ella has always, always loved music, being sung to, and playing the drums. She is very rhythmically oriented and any type of music has always soothed her. Additionally, we have continually used singing as a reinforcer for her in her daily routine.

So from the age of 3, we brought Ella to Music Therapy every week and a variety of talented, patient people worked with her, trying to get her to stay in the room and sit on her carpet square. If they were able to achieve those goals, they would try to encourage her to say something in the microphone or shake a shaker egg or pat a drum. She was always motivated to pop the bubbles during bubble time and she just loved the parachute and the different songs that they used. Grace was in her infant car seat at the time, but soon was out of that stage, sitting in my lap, and participating along with and often times much better than her older sister. She was so happy to be a part of the fun that Ella was having. At some point, the day and time for music changed and it conflicted with Ella's hours of preschool and outpatient therapies. We took a break, but then another few years later, didn't I happen upon the Wesley table at the very same summer camp fair in February of 2013 (big and hugely pregnant with our 3rd daughter, Georgie!). I inquired about the day and time of the south hills music group and they told me to give Katie a call. I did and didn't you know we were back in Music Therapy that next week at Wesley Academy! Ella was 9 and Gracie 6.5.

Grace often accompanied Ella in her individual sessions and sometimes in the group ones, as her other sisters did on and off as they were available. Music Therapy has always been an avenue of stress relief and enjoyment for Ella. Sometimes it is a lot of effort, but the therapists are always working on a goal that allows her to accomplish a task, whether it is a communication attempt or following a 2 and 3 step direction; she is learning. The therapists that work with her are highly trained in both music and various teaching approaches. They use all kinds of techniques and strategies to work with each of the children to bring out their individual strengths. It is often an aerobic 30 minutes with 3 or 4 clients all going different directions with various and specific needs, but Katie and her staff are able to address those needs, de-escalate stressful situations, and make some beautiful music.

Calming strategies are implemented regularly and each child has a different one. It is an amazing thing to watch and over the years, I have been able to participate in several sessions. No matter how difficult my day or week is going, I know that I will feel ten times better after a music therapy session. I don't know if it is because Ella is completely at ease or because I am. It is relaxing and the therapists know how to address each situation and still keep the client's goals in mind. They might be passing a ball or have each child play a different instrument. It might go well or it truly might not, but any and all of that is okay. It is a safe space to be how you are and enjoy music in your own way. Each participant is given the respect and freedom to do it their way, but then they are also challenged to go a little further and learn something new. It's a magical 30 minutes and as Ella is now an adult, I am so grateful for that 30 minutes each week for her.

A lot of her childhood activities and therapies ended when she turned 18 and that has been a huge, difficult transition for her and our family. We are grateful for the willingness of the highly knowledgeable Music Therapy staff to continue to hone into Ella's love of music and to creatively foster new skill development. Music Therapy has been a consistent, life-giving part of our daughter's routine for 16 years. The benefits from her time in Music Therapy are immeasurable. My husband and I, wholeheartedly believe that her success and level of achievement is directly due to the highly trained individuals providing the Music Therapy sessions. Furthermore those therapists deserve a system of licensure to delineate those who are qualified to provide Music Therapy and those who are not.

Please support efforts to License Professional Musical Therapists and place them under the State Board of Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists and Professional Counselors by voting "yes" on House Bill 1356.

Jennifer and Bryan Baer
819 Longvue Drive
Houston, PA 15342
C: 724-255-0722