Commerce Committee Members:

My name is Megan Sutton, and I am a special education teacher writing in support of SF 1101, which would require health insurance companies to cover Augmentative and Alternative Communication systems (AAC).

I've been a special educator for ten years and currently teach kindergarten and first-grade students on the autism spectrum. I have witnessed firsthand the life-changing impact AAC systems have on students with all levels of verbal ability. A core component of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is differences in communication and social interaction. These differences are often described as a deficit due to our society's focus on verbal communication. However, I invite you to consider how providing accessible communication systems challenges the negative stereotypes of autism and allows autistic individuals to thrive.

My first example is someone you may have heard of, Dr. Temple Grandin. Dr. Grandin is a world-famous animal scientist, inventor, and one of the first to share the autistic experience with the world at large. When she was a child, doctors recommended institutionalization. Thankfully, her mother fought for alternatives, including speech therapy and sensory accommodations. In her book, "Thinking in Pictures," she attributes her academic and career success to the way her autistic brain views the world. Without the support of her family and medical professionals, Dr. Grandin may not have been able to make such an impact on the agriculture industry and the disability advocacy space.

My next example comes directly from my students. Outdated views of autism claim that my students lack empathy and don't want to socialize with others. They prove every day how wrong that is, thanks in part to their AAC systems. One of my first-grade students seeks out connections with staff and peers in the best ways he knows. Sometimes this leads to unsafe situations because he knows staff will always intervene to keep him safe. For him, it's a 100% success rate in getting our attention, so it only makes sense to keep doing it. We are teaching him more positive ways to seek connection, especially using his AAC. His unsafe behaviors have greatly decreased because he knows he can always ask for a hug with his AAC. Providing him with effective communication allows him to express his feelings and needs without resorting to behaviors that would otherwise label him as a problem. He is an incredibly intelligent child, and I am grateful for the accommodations that allow him to shine in his own way.

I hope that my testimony, along with the testimony of others, convinces you of the absolute necessity of AAC systems for individuals with communication differences. Making these systems accessible allows those who need them to share their unique experiences, ideas, and abilities with society, ultimately benefiting everyone.

Thank you for your time.