EXHIBIT 5
DATE 3/11/13
SB

CATHERINE A. OFF, PH.D., CCC-SLP
SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST

March 7, 2013

Mr. Chair, Members of the Committee,

My name is Catherine Off. I am a speech-language pathologist (SLP), clinical supervisor, and professor at The University of Montana who serves stroke survivors, traumatic brain injury survivors, and individuals with degenerative diseases like multiple sclerosis. The clients I serve have difficulties speaking, reading, writing, understanding spoken or written language, and may have difficulties with memory and attention. Improving and maintaining communication abilities for these individuals is essential for their continued participation in their social, vocational, and recreational lives. I am writing to advocate for the passage of SB 230.

The passage of SB 230 is crucial for the citizens of Montana and for those who serve them. This legislation is particularly important for those individuals who have limited access to a local SLP or audiologist. Montana is a large, rural state with few resources and/or speech and language services. From 1989-2009, the state of Montana was without a graduate level communication disorders university program. As a result, many communities still exist without an SLP. Currently, Montana has 420 state-licensed SLPs (personal communication, Montana Board of SLPs and Audiologists). Montana ranks 46th in the nation for availability of SLP services; only 32.6 ASHA-certified SLPs are available for every 100,000 residents (http://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/Personnel-to-Population-Ratios-State-2011.pdf). This ratio is half that of the top-ranked state of New York.

Additional barriers prevent access to services for individuals with communication disorders in Montana. These barriers include: (1) geographic obstacles including distance, difficulty of travel on rural roads, and severe winter weather, (2) financial obstacles including lack of insurance or out-of-pocket funds for services and transportation costs, (3) physical limitations including reduced mobility, and comorbid health conditions. Additionally, the rural nature of Montana inherently decreases the number of opportunities for social communication, particularly with other people with communication disorders, that are known to maintain and support continued speech and language rehabilitation (Northcott & Hilari, 2011). As a result of these obstacles, individuals with communication disorders in Montana do not always receive the services they need to improve and maintain their communication skills and their participation in social, vocation, and/or recreational roles. Internet-based telecommunication provides a low-cost opportunity to increase access, resources, social interaction, and daily communicative participation for individuals with communication disorders.

Senate Bill 230 is extremely important for a number of reasons:

1. Montana is a large, rural state with too few speech-language pathologists;
2. Expertise in specific speech, language, and hearing disorders is essential;
3. Intensive and frequent therapy is deemed best practice for stroke and traumatic brain injury rehabilitation; yet many individuals do not have access to such services in their area.

This bill will authorize telepractice of speech-language pathology and audiology, a practice supported by the national professional associations and already adopted by 16 other states. It will bring needed high-quality, confidential services to patients in their homes via the Internet. This Bill is necessary because the Department of Labor and Industry attorneys do not believe that the board of speech-language pathologist and audiologists have the rulemaking authority to authorize telepractice.

The American Speech-Language and Hearing Association endorses and provides education and training for telepractice for practicing clinicians. The Montana Speech-Language and Hearing Association fully supports this bill. Our Montana Board of Licensure in Speech-Language Pathology endorses this bill. Please add the endorsement of practicing speech-language pathologists and clinical educators.

Catherine A. Off, Ph.D., CCC-SLP