

America Is Getting in the Hearing Loop

BY STEPHEN O. FRAZIER

HLAA leaders could have been singing the old Steve Allen lyrics, “This could be the start of something big” when, in partnership with the American Academy of Audiology, they kicked off the Get in the Hearing Loop (GITHL) campaign in 2010. Back then there were just a few formally organized efforts, such as Loop New Mexico and Loop Wisconsin, promoting awareness and the availability of hearing loops in public places. But only in Michigan, thanks to the groundbreaking work of Dr. David Myers of Hope College, and at many of the nation’s HLAA Chapter meetings did hearing loops have any real presence.

The creation of the GITHL campaign really was the start of something big and it has inspired an impressive consumer-driven effort that stretches from coast to coast. There are now nearly three dozen looping campaigns sponsored by HLAA Chapters and State Organizations and a handful of other nonprofit efforts such as Loop Minnesota and Let’s Loop Tucson. Sertoma clubs around the country are promoting the technology as part of their national “A Sound Investment” campaign, often fully or partially funding the looping of local nonprofit venues.

Hearing health care offices are beginning to promote hearing loops on their websites and the technology is also being adopted by business and governmental entities with growing speed. In many communities, like Kearney, Nebraska (population 34,000) and Lawrence, Kansas (population 95,000), cities with no local HLAA chapter, HLAA members have successfully advocated for

hearing loops and now more than two dozen places of worship, theaters and other public places are featuring the technology in those two cities.

From Local to National

The Minnesota Governor’s signing of a Capital Improvement Appropriations Bill last May didn’t just appropriate money, it placed a law on the books requiring that future construction of, or improvements to, all state-funded gathering places equipped with a public address system must also be equipped with an assistive listening system using hearing loop technology. The Minnesota action was mirrored in New York City,



where the city council passed a similar requirement. Between the advocacy efforts of Janice Schacter Lintz, CEO of Hearing Access & Innovations, the HLAA New York City Chapter and others, New York City has become a poster child for the looping movement.

Beyond the new requirement to loop city-funded gathering places, more than 600 of the city’s subway information and fare kiosks have been equipped with hearing loops and all new taxicabs now feature loops. Several Broadway theaters have also been looped and others now offer neckloops as an alternative to headsets to use with their FM and Infrared (IR) systems. Loops can be found at ticket or information counters at Penn Station, Grand Central Station, the Metropolitan Museum and even Yankee Stadium. On the city’s website is a 17-page directory of looped venues compiled by the HLAA New York City Chapter that lists everything from drugstore prescription counters to memorial chapels.

On the West Coast, in May 2017 the Bay Area Rapid Transit system (BART), which serves the San Francisco Bay area, announced they would be including hearing loops in all new rail cars ordered for their system, and they have opened their first looped train platform. In the last year the statehouses in both Rhode Island and Arizona have had their legislative chambers and committee meeting rooms looped. Delta Air Lines has been testing loops at some of their gates in Detroit and Rochester, New York, and Virgin Atlantic Airlines added neckloops as an option instead of earbuds for watching movies on international flights.

Houses of Worship Take the Lead

Places of worship have taken the lead in adopting this technology for their sanctuaries, with well over 400 installations just in Wisconsin in less than a decade. This catches them up to Michigan, an early adopter that has a similar number of loop installations. Though exempt from requirements in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), untold thousands of sanctuaries in places of worship and hundreds of theaters and city council chambers have been fitted with hearing loops around the country since the GITHL campaign began.

Such venues as the Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo, Michigan airports, the Oshkosh, Wisconsin Grand Opera House and the Milwaukee Intermodal Station (the inter-city train and bus station) have loops installed bringing the total number of looped facilities to more 1,000 in those two states alone. The 12,000 seat Breslin Center at Michigan State University has even been looped!

At the time the Get in the Hearing Loop campaign kicked off, loop and telecoil technology was given increased awareness through revisions to the ADA, which required that all assistive listening systems be hearing aid compatible. With current technology, only induction loops can meet the mandate that any gathering place like a theater or council chamber with a public address system must also have an assistive listening system. Further, that system must either be a hearing loop or 25 percent of the receivers must be equipped with neckloops if there is an FM or IR system installed.

For those not familiar with hearing loops, in its simplest form it is a copper wire that circles a room and transmits sound through an electromagnetic field to receivers in hearing aids and cochlear implants called telecoils. For those whose hearing aids are not equipped with telecoils (or who do not wear hearing aids), hearing loops work the same way as an FM or IR system—the user borrows a receiver and headset to access the system.

The looping of the west coast of Michigan was inspired by David Myers more than 20 years ago after he was introduced to the technology at a remote abbey in Scotland. Advocating for hearing loops in public venues is now a national consumer-led movement that’s changing the way people hear in those venues.

You can start a movement in your own community by doing something as simple as cutting out the “Ask for a Favor” form on page 45, signing it, and taking it to your audiologist or hearing instrument specialist so they, too, will Get in the Hearing Loop. **HL**

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Dear Provider,

Hearing loop and telecoil technology has dramatically improved my ability to hear in places I never dreamed of before. And I've also learned that:

- In a recent survey 85 percent of hearing aid users reported that they have and regularly use telecoils in their hearing aids.
- Those with hearing loss are six times more likely to use an assistive listening system that connects to a telecoil in hearing aids than one requiring earphones and a receiver.
- Bluetooth technology has many great uses but it won't help me or others hear in my place of worship, at the theater or in other public places of assembly, but telecoils, via hearing loops, can.
- Hearing loops are becoming the primary assistive listening system in more and more places of worship throughout the country and in such locations as legislative chambers, theaters and even in New York City taxicabs.
- The latest revisions to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandate that all new assistive listening systems be hearing aid compatible, and currently telecoils, paired with neckloops or a room loop, are the only technology that can meet that requirement.

With that information in mind, please allow me to ask for a small favor:

- If there's not already a hearing loop installed in your waiting area please consider installing one so everyone visiting can have an opportunity to experience the benefit that a hearing loop provides.
- Install a counter loop at the reception desk so clients can better hear the staff.
- Install a looped TV in fitting rooms to demonstrate how hearing aids with a telecoil can be adjusted for optimum performance with a loop.

Whatever you do, please consider joining the growing number of hearing care providers around the country who have started their own Get in the Hearing Loop campaign. Go to hearingloss.org/content/loop-technology or hearingloop.org for more information.

Cordially,