

Bills would help New Mexicans who have hearing loss

By Steve Frazier / Hearing Loss Support Specialist - Thursday, January 21st, 2016

Estimates indicate more than 300,000 New Mexicans have some degree of hearing loss and there are many very caring, conscientious audiologists and hearing aid dispensers here who provide exemplary service meeting their needs. They willingly "go the extra mile" to ensure clients get all the benefits hearing aids can provide including counseling them about how hearing aids can wirelessly connect to assistive listening systems in their home TV room, at church, the movies and elsewhere with the touch of a button. Unfortunately some providers don't do this. Legislation pre-filed for the current New Mexico legislative session addresses this problem by supporting the goal of maximizing the benefits of hearing aids.

Led by the N.M. Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing and the state's three Hearing Loss Association of America chapters, two bills before the legislature, HB 70, sponsored by Rep. Carl Trujillo, D-Santa Fe, and SB 70, sponsored by Sen. Michael Padilla, D-Albuquerque, make it clear that the counseling of clients purchasing hearing aids must include information on this technology thus allowing buyers to make an informed decision as to whether or not the technology would be useful to them.

Current state regulations stipulate that audiologists and hearing aid dispensers "shall provide counseling" without delineating what constitutes such counseling. National hearing loss support organizations contend that a free technology available in over 70 percent of current hearing aid models doubles their functionality and needs to be included in the counseling mandate.

That technology, called telecoils, allows users to connect to the ALS required by the Americans With Disabilities Act for most large venues with a public address system by simply touching a button on their hearing aids or cochlear implants to connect to the ALS.

There's no need to remove their hearing aids and don a headset. The same technology allows them to hear the TV better, to hear better on the telephone, to listen to their MP3 player, to talk hands free on their cell phone and more.

Telecoils virtually double the functionality of hearing aids that become customized personal communication systems yet, when asked why they don't tell clients about telecoils, many providers will say, "they don't need it, they can have Bluetooth."

Well, Bluetooth adds considerably to the versatility of hearing aids but it won't work in many situations cited above such as a church, theater or the looped City Council chambers in Albuquerque and Santa Fe where telecoils do work.

Some say clients have no place to use telecoils, but who doesn't use the telephone? One provider recently was more honest and said telling clients about it would take too much time. Most clients are told about Bluetooth technology that can add to the cost of hearing aids but most are not told about telecoils which usually add not one cent to their retail price.

A recent online survey of the hard of hearing found that hearing aid wearers who had been trained in the use of telecoils used them regularly for the purposes cited above. That same survey found that only 33 percent of those hearing aid users had been told about telecoils when first buying hearing aids. The other 67 percent learned about them elsewhere.

The bills in question are a consumer protection issue with support from the national offices of the Hearing Loss Association of America, the Association of Late Deafened Adults, Telecommunications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and others.

All three New Mexico HLAA chapters, the N.M. Association for the Deaf and many others have endorsed the legislation. Readers can learn more about this issue – the technology, the bills, supporters – at www.CCAnm.homestead.com/home.html and then decide if they want to contact their representative and senator and ask that they support these bills when they come up for consideration before adjournment in February.

Steve Frazier is the co-chair of the Committee for Communication Access in New Mexico and the N.M. Chapter Coordinator for the Hearing Loss Association of America.