



Hearing When You Can't Hear

January 18, 2024

The majority selected captions as their first choice for accessibility.

By Stephen O. Frazier

A group of advocates for people with hearing loss formed the [Committee for Communication Access in America \(CCAA\)](#) to look into why more people with hearing issues don't utilize the assistive communication technology that's available to them. As the chair, I began recruiting members for the committee in May.

Captions are the number one accessibility tool requested, but they are not mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act. [Watch the full captioned Instagram Reel above.](#)

We spent June through August drafting, reviewing, and rewriting a survey that ultimately had more than 1,500 people with hearing loss or hearing-related conditions answer. Our goal was to understand why assistive listening systems (ALS) are underutilized in public spaces like theaters, even though they are mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

[The survey](#) found that while many people with hearing loss look for and request accommodations, they are often not available—62 percent answered “seldom or never” when asked how often they can find accommodations.

A surprise result of the survey, whose respondents were heavily weighted toward people with severe to profound hearing loss, was that the majority selected captions as their first choice if only one system was to be available. Less surprising was hearing loops ranking as the first choice for ALS, with over 60 percent selecting it instead of FM, infrared, or WiFi systems.

Unlike the listening systems, captions are not mandated by the ADA and therein lies the biggest reason they are not used—they are not provided, often even when specifically

requested. When asked how often they encountered problems with either type of system in venues where they did find them, many participants offered detailed answers.

Key Accessibility Issues

Inadequate signage fails to alert people that accommodations exist.

This was the top complaint. The ADA not only mandates signage, it states where it is to be placed, the size and style of the type, and other requirements. It's not clear whether it's the venue, the ALS installer, the event sponsor, or who is responsible for actually providing the signage. Consequently I can report that it somehow got overlooked on the completion of a new multiplex in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I have also been told that a blue hearing loop sign was removed because it clashed with the décor, such as in the Albuquerque Journal Theater.

Poorly trained staff are unable to demonstrate and troubleshoot devices.

Users of both visual and aural systems complained that the staff dispensing the devices was quite often poorly (or simply not) trained in their use. One respondent recalled a staffer mistakenly offering the lanyard for the receiver as a neck loop.

Weak or dead batteries appear in assistive devices.

Judging only by the number of complaints beginning with the word battery or batteries, weak or dead batteries are the number one problem with any of these systems and it could be avoided by an effective procedure for recharging all devices loaned out upon their return.

Captions are often nonfunctional or not turned on.

Respondents said they had to be in the hall with the device turned on and captions being broadcast in order to determine if it was working. Because of this, users were unable to confirm captioning worked until seated, and then missing the show if issues arose. One respondent wrote that she had “no way to reach staff to fix the device during live theater when I am in front row of live comedy and actors think there's something wrong with me because I am not laughing.”

Equipment is incompatible or low quality, like weak neck loops and distracting feedback.

One respondent said, “Often the signal isn't strong enough and I must loop the neck loop over my ears to hear.” Another more experienced respondent solved that problem and reported, “Because of the inherent weakness in neck loops, I always bring my own amplified neck loop,” a solution also mentioned by others. Survey participants complained

about feedback from earphones, static in loop signals, long lines to return receivers, and even poor microphone etiquette.

Hearing providers fail to fully educate on assistive technologies.

Though only a few complained that their hearing care provider had not adequately counseled them in ALS technology, in the questionnaire itself, 17 percent reported they'd never even known about loops and telecoils until taking the survey. In addition, more than half reported they learned of that technology from someone other than their hearing care provider.

The Promise of Improvement

The ADA mandates accessibility, but many practical factors impede usage of accommodations. Proper execution is lacking, from infrastructure and equipment to staff training and device maintenance. However, the growing availability of quality hearing aids, over-the-counter options, and assistive technologies offers promise. With diligent implementation, people with hearing loss can participate more fully. As Canadian humorist and author Gael Hannon says, "There's never been a better time than now to have hearing loss."

See the [full survey results](#) via a PDF on the CCAA website. See also [this summary from Hearing Tracker](#), whose [founder Abram Bailey, Au.D.](#), was part of the CCAA committee.

Trained by the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) as a hearing loss support specialist, Hearing Health magazine staff writer and New Mexico resident Stephen O. Frazier has served the HLAA and other groups at the local, state, and national levels as a volunteer in their efforts to improve communication access for people with hearing loss. Contact him at hlaanm@juno.com.