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Looping campaigns for dummies or The GITHL Advocacy Guide and Handbook

...this comprehensive guide provides an easy-to-follow road map for creating looped communities.

You're no dummy if you want to start a local hearing loop campaign but there's no need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to setting out to do so. The Get in the Hearing Loop Committee (GITHL) of the Hearing Loss Association of America has rolled out a Guide and Handbook to make the job easier and also spun off an impressive supply of material to use in a campaign to get your community "In the Hearing Loop." The handbook draws on the collective knowledge of a cadre of experienced hearing loop advocates and their successful campaigns to detail what to do and when to do it. It can be invaluable to hearing loop installers as well as individuals and groups advocating for hearing loops.

Entitled [How to Successfully Advocate for Hearing Loops: A Step By Step Guide](#), this comprehensive guide provides an easy-to-follow road map for creating looped communities. Sections include Being Strategic, A-Z Advocacy, an Advocacy Cheat Sheet, FAQ, and more. The complete downloadable file includes a Get in the Hearing Loop Toolkit Handbook that reviews the wealth of advocacy material created by the GITHL Committee that is also available in printed form in addition to being downloadable. Users can download [Part 1 here](#) and [Part 2 here](#). Like a resource library, this document provides access to GITHL tools, resources, and knowledge that advocates can use to educate decision-makers about hearing loss, communication access, and the benefits of hearing loops. Links to view and download each tool are included.

With the [Get in the Hearing Loop Toolkit Checklist](#) users will have a checklist of the documents available in the [Get in the Hearing Loop Toolkit](#) like literature, handouts, signage, templates, posters, a sample Powerpoint presentation, postcards, and more. For frosting on the cake, there's the [Google Maps Toolkit](#) to help people use this new feature and spread the word about hearing loops. It helps users write a review, upload photos, and submit looped venue info to the committee who, in turn, work with Google to get the info up and available on Google Maps.

Awareness of hearing loops by people with hearing loss was created by HLAA found Rocky Stone and chapters around the country began using the technology in the late 80s but the history of this type of looping campaign is believed to begin with that of Prof. David Myers in Holland, MI in the 90s and formalized in his [website](#). The Albuquerque, NM HLAA chapter was the first of that national organization's local chapters to join in the effort with their [Loop New Mexico](#) initiative and they were awarded the very first HLAA GITHL Aware in 2011. Wisconsin audiologist Juliette Sterkens' [Let's Loop Wisconsin](#) effort began shortly after the one in New Mexico. These campaigns established a pattern of such initiatives being organized by individuals, by hearing loss support groups and by hearing care providers that is ongoing. Lessons have been learned over the years on organizing and running such a campaign and they have now been recorded in a handbook to guide people new to the idea of organizing such an effort.

OTC hearing aids are here...sort of

Anyone wanting telecoils in their hearing aids will be disappointed when visiting a store – they're apparently not going to be there.

When the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released their rules for over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids in August 2022, it was certainly not much ado about nothing. Instead, it was an earthquake in the hearing aid and hearing care industries. It affects not just OTC hearing aids but also prescription hearing aids. It legalized the sale of medical grade hearing aids by a pharmacist at Walgreens or a "blue shirt" at Best Buy. You can now buy hearing aids at some Verizon stores while buying the phone used to adjust their settings. Blueshirts at Best Buy are receiving specialized training on the features and use of hearing aids and ASHA (American Speech-Language and hearing Association) has developed a special course for training pharmacists in the technology.

The new rules created confusion in regard to the pre-emption of state laws governing the dispensing of hearing aids and the subsequent impact on both prescribers and the state boards that license them remain to be fully resolved

Where can you buy them?

Hearing aids are now available over-the-counter but only some counters and not even the businesses seem to know which counters those are. Expected by many to be in the pharmacy area of all Walmart stores, the company has, instead, placed them in their **Vision Centers** and opening day media reports said they would only be in stores in Colorado, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Texas. According to the [Santa Fe New Mexican](#), though, four different Hearing Assist models could be purchased in the supercenter vision center on that city's south side. The Walgreens on St. Francis Drive in Santa Fe also had them in stock on opening day but somebody broke into a locked cabinet where the devices were kept and stole two of them. Fifty miles south, they were not to be found in either chain's stores on Albuquerque's West Side.

Best Buy has created a separate department in just 300 of their 1,000 stores and [trained a staff](#) of "blue shirts" in the technology. Both of these retailers also offer a broad selection of personal sound amplification products (PSAPS) both online and in some of their their stores that are sure to blur the line

between PSAPS and hearing aids for consumers with some of the former selling for more than the latter. Eargo, one of the pricier of the OTC devices on the market, is partnering with [Victra](#), an independent operator of 1,600 Verizon cellular phone stores, to stock and sell their smartphone controlled, in-the-canal hearing aids. Staffers, already well versed in cell phone operation, will receive comparable training on Eargo devices and there will even be an in-store hearing test. Adding to the confusion, Starkey, the only major U.S. hearing aid manufacturer, [just announced](#) they will make and market a hearing aid that qualifies as an OTC product and named the device Start Hearing One. But it will only be sold by hearing care professionals. Even Hy-Vee supermarkets will offer the devices over the counter in 34 of their 280 locations across Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and Wisconsin. They feature three of the four iHear hearing aids from InnerScope Hearing Technologies that range in price from \$499.00 to \$999.00. For a goodly portion of the thirty-million potential OTC hearing aid customers it appears that, at least for now, these new hearing aid products will really be OTI (Over the Internet) hearing aids.

Prior to October 17, conventional wisdom was that OTC hearing aids would sell for between \$200 and \$1,000 but that's changed. The top end is at \$2,950 for a pair of the tiny but highly rated Eargo 6 in-the-canal hearing aids at Best Buy or Verizon.

TELECOILS

Anyone wanting telecoils in their hearing aids will be disappointed when visiting a store – they're apparently not going to be there. Early reports were that Best Buy and Walgreens would be offering **the Lexie Lumen that does contain telecoils** but it appears both decided to, instead, stock the Lexie B2 – the repurposed Bose behind the ear device that costs more, does not have telecoils and more limited Bluetooth capabilities.

There are substantial differences in the features found in various devices being offered that range from standard configurations to the peculiar with some, if not all, of the bells and whistles of prescription devices such as customizable sound, multiple sound-environment settings called "memories," rechargeability, directional microphones, AI (artificial intelligence) and even accessories like remote mics. Bluetooth capabilities will vary and some will have smartphone apps. **Lexie's Lumen, though not available OTC, can be ordered online at either the [Lexie website](#) or that of [Best Buy](#)**

Pricing

As noted earlier, prices will be as low as \$199 and at least initially top out at nearly \$3,000 for a pair. Because the markup on these devices is lower than that taken by hearing care offices for prescription hearing aids, it's hard to compare a \$3,000 pair of OTC hearing aids to a \$3,000 pair of prescription devices. In an extensive study of hearing aid pricing done by Aryn M. Amlani, Ph.D., the president of Otolithic Consulting that was reported on in [Hearing Health and Technology Matters](#), she reported that, at the time, the average prescription hearing aid that cost \$457 was retailed at \$1,785 by a hearing care office. That's roughly 75% markup in retailer terms (75% of the price is markup) but nearly 400% markup in the minds of the public.

Traditional retailers such as Dillard's or promotional stores like Macy's would retail an item costing \$457 at between \$900 to \$1,200 and, in the latter case, then put it on sale for 20% off. Even that is not the sort of markup being taken by online sellers of devices that now qualify as OTC hearing aids nor what businesses like Best Buy or Walmart take. Smartphones and other consumer electronics are generally merchandised at an [8 to 10 percent](#) markup. Walmart operates on an average [32 percent markup](#).

This would seem to indicate that a \$3,000 pair of OTC devices would very possibly compare in features and quality to a \$5,000 pair of prescription hearing aids. These retailers will be selling OTC hearing aids without the testing, fitting and bundled follow-up care of prescription hearing aids. Conversely, this would appear to mean that a \$3,000 pair of OTC hearing would be superior in features and quality that a \$3,000 prescription pair. The adjusting of the hearing aids to match an audiogram (available free online) and other "fine tuning" will be up to the buyer.

Conclusion

Looking at the percentage of people who could benefit from hearing aids who actually have them in the UK (where they're free), causes one to wonder if this new class of hearing aids will actually increase hearing aid ownership here in the US. The British percentage is not markedly higher than here in the US where usually they're not even partially covered by insurance, let alone free.

It also remains to be seen if \$3,000 OTC hearing aids are even viable but one thing is certain - buyers of OTC hearing aids stand to save thousands while, for the next year or so, the hearing care industry will be going through a remake as dramatic as the one back in the 1970s when audiologists were first allowed to sell and fit hearing aids. Before that, they might test a person's hearing but they then had to send the individual to a hearing aid dealer to buy and be fitted with hearing aids. Some believe it will become more common for them to unbundle services and then lower prices. They may also stock and sell OTC devices or, for a fee, adjust them for clients who purchased them elsewhere. Many are doing that to a degree now, fitting hearing aids bought online.

Smartphones, smartwatches, and now **smart hearing aids.**

*Many of these hearing aid features and more are shared
by the various brands...*

Fifty years ago "Get Smart" was a hit TV show about a bumbling international spy. Today it's an admonition to join the millions who already have smart cars, smart homes, smartphones, smart watches and yes...smart hearing aids. All of this smartness is the result of the development of two things, artificial intelligence (AI) and Bluetooth LE (low energy).

AI came first. The term itself was coined in 1956 as the name for an academic discipline that could be traced back to the 30's and 40's when experiments began to explore the concept of "thinking machines". It is the simulation of human intelligence in processes performed by machines and, especially, computer systems. AI is now making decisions for some of us we may not even be conscious of with our various "smart" devices. We've all experienced it when our web browser shows us products based on searches we did earlier. It "knows" what interests us. Since they began offering the option of computer generated captions as an option instead of those voiced or typed into a computer by a captioner, CapTel's services became another example of AI and CapTel will tell you that the AI system is both faster and more accurate than the human driven version..

It was in 1999 that Bluetooth® first made its appearance in consumer devices as a mobile wireless headset but it took another six years before it found its way into hearing aids. That's when the Starkey ELI was introduced. Other hearing help applications of Bluetooth followed but they required a wireless streamer to relay sound and sucked power out of hearing aid batteries like a baby with a bottle. A decade later Bluetooth LE

(low energy or BLE) was developed and that's when development of smart hearing aids quietly began. Today some of them appear to be so smart they qualify for an advanced degree. They're labeled "smart" because of their ability to adapt to different listening situations using AI and require no intervention by the actual user.

Lack of sufficient reserve power precluded hearing aids from taking advantage of the burgeoning field of artificial intelligence before but, now, BLE enabled hearing aids are capable of performing the extensive computation AI requires and it allows them to connect and interact with smart mobile devices. With this change, hearing aids and the devices that can be paired with them are making sometimes dramatic changes in the lives of people with hearing loss.

With its debut in hearing aids, AI could be "taught" certain things when installed but could then learn from experience and make adjustments based on particular hearing experiences. It's programmed to solve complex problems with intelligent solutions. After being assigned certain tasks AI can learn new patterns through automatic sensing and change the way it performs those tasks. In hearing aids, AI can automatically adjust volume in a user's hearing aids to amplify specific sounds in a given situation or it can reduce or eliminate them. AI hearing aids can learn a user's habits and default manual settings and then learn to make adjustment based on that knowledge. BLE is being used by hearing care providers to wirelessly connect to and program hearing aids and, using AI, is even being used to program hearing aids to match an audiogram without the need for that human technician.

Signia and Rexton have a smart feature run by their app that allows the user to "aim" the microphones forward, to the left or to the right. They can face just to the rear or they can do a half circle. With the newest devices a gyroscope can detect that you've started to walk and automatically switch back to the surround sound setting to help your environmental awareness. A unique feature included in the app is a mask mode that is intended to help the user hear better when people are wearing face masks that can reduce the sound level of their voice by up to 10 decibels. Starkey's Thrive app mimics the directionality feature of Signia and also lets a user adjust the volume on just one or the other of the devices and functions as a control panel to adjust high and low frequencies individually on the left, the right, or both hearing aids. Widex has developed an AI program it calls SoundSense Learn that allows users to personalize their listening preferences by selecting the sound settings that seem to be the best to them using a simple A/B comparison of the sound.

Oticon claims the AI in their OPNs technology can identify and reduce unwanted sounds in an environment, filtering out what's seen as noise while passing on identifiable spoken words. In a report on this feature, one user said, "The first thing that struck me about the OPNs was that the background noise sounded different, people's voices from other tables around us sounded a lot more natural with the OPNs, I was able to isolate different groups and know where their voices were coming from. The noisy room chatter felt a lot more manageable, much less of "Woah, its noisy in here" - it's difficult to describe but it kind of felt to me that the background noise was really in the background,

was at a pleasant volume, wasn't distorted or overwhelming and had clarity about it." Among other Opn capabilities is that, in addition to its possibly unheard ding-dong, a user can set Opn hearing aids to sound a separate alert to a ringing doorbell.

Actions unrelated to hearing are also featured. Oticon OPNs hearing aids can be connected to devices such as the lighting in a smart house. Starkey's Evolv, using their smart phone app, monitors and counts a user's daily steps and activities. Using AI, they can detect if that person has fallen down and then even alert a designated individual of that fall. The app provides captions of the user's and other's voices in conversations and can even translate such a conversation in 27 different spoken languages and send it aurally direct to a user's hearing hearing aids,

Many these hearing aid marvels and more are shared by the various brands and some are exclusive to one or two nameplates. Then there are other examples of apps and technologies, often incorporating AI, that interact with smart hearing aids to perform tasks for them via a smartphone. If you don't have Starkey Evolv hearing aids and their "Thrive" app, not to worry. There are multiple apps available at Apple's App Store or Google Play to provide live captions or translations or to monitor how many steps a person takes each day. There are apps like Ear Scout or Chatable that turn a smartphone into a remote mic that uses Bluetooth or a neckloop to transmit that sound to hearing aids. The SoundPrint app will locate a quiet cafe or other tranquil setting for a tired tourist seek respite from the day's aural over stimulation.

For hearing aid wearers whose devices don't have telecoils, many hearing aid brands now offer a remote mic that does double duty. It can pick up sound at a distant location and transmit it to hearing aids via Bluetooth. It can also, though, thanks to an embedded telecoil, receive the electromagnetic signal from a hearing loop and stream that signal to the hearing aids. Some will do likewise with an FM signal.

If well cared for, hearing aids have been known to last ten or more years but, on average, their users replace them every 5 or 6 years. With all of the advances AI has made possible, word of mouth may tempt some users to take a look at new hearing aids even if theirs are not yet considered long in the tooth, but they'll have to balance that against the anticipated introduction of Auracast in hearing aids that's still to come. Auracast is a new Bluetooth technology that makes it possible, for the first time, for multiple wearers of compatible hearing aids to connect to the now possible assistive listening system transmitting sound via this new technology that's beginning its roll-out in consumer electronics but still in the wings for hearing aids. This might cause them to question if it's smart to get smart just yet.

New gates looped at Fort Wayne IN airport

If your airport is normally eligible for Airport Improvement Program grants, you're eligible for this program...

An article last year in this newsletter announced that the Fort Wayne, IN airport was one of many that had received federal grants either from the FAA or as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to be used for improvements of many types. A portion of that multi-million grant was used to install hearing loops in new gates at the Fort Wayne terminal. A new section was added to the facility that incorporated an existing Gate 8 along with new Gates 9 and 10. Airport officials say they are now working to renovate Gates 5-7, which will remain closed until early 2023.

Airport officials worked with several advocacy groups to ensure the new area would be accessible to travelers with disabilities. Included in those accommodations are height accessible gate counters, high contrast signage and even a new Service Animal Relief Area. New furniture that includes work tables with connections for computers or to charge cellular phones were also installed. The hearing loops were installed under the carpeting in the gate seating areas.

The cost for what was called the West Terminal expansion that included the loops at the gates was \$47 million and another \$60 million will be spent, beginning in 2023 for the "East Terminal Project". Federal funds totaling \$13.8 million were awarded the airport in July. That grant was the result of competitive applications from airports throughout the US under the competitive Airport Terminals Program within the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Through that law, \$5 billion has been appropriated for winners of competitive grants for airport terminal development projects that address the aging infrastructure of the nation's airports. The first \$1B has been awarded to more than 90 projects at airports across the country. Remaining funds are up for grabs by airport administrations that can make an effective case for their need and present a winning proposal.

These grants can fund projects that will improve airfield safety through terminal relocation, replace aging facilities, increase capacity, encourage competition, improve energy efficiency, and increase or improve access to passengers with disabilities and historically disadvantaged populations. Eligible airports include those operated by authorities, cities, territories and tribes within the national air transportation system.

What does this mean to readers of this newsletter? If your airport is eligible for Airport Improvement Program (AIP) grants you can make it happen. Recent additions the looped airport list in major cities like Seattle and smaller communities like Oshkosh, WI did not just happen. Local looping advocates played a major role in that happening. Advocates, whether loop installers, HLAA chapter members or any organization working for the needs of people with a disability, can be the moving force in getting their airport "In the Hearing Loop."

Remote Telecoils

Some other brands also reportedly offer remote mics fitted with a telecoil but that doesn't mean buyers of the devices will be told about the included telecoil...

For those unfortunate souls who were fitted with Bluetooth® capable hearing aids that don't contain telecoils, there is now a solution that will allow them to connect to a hearing loop just as their telecoil equipped brethren do. Some hearing aid manufacturers have now included a telecoil in their remote mics but it's not always publicized in the literature on those mics. Starkey, for example, offers two remote mics – a Mini Remote Microphone and a larger Remote Microphone Plus. The mini contains no telecoil but the "Plus" model does. That telecoil allows the mic to receive the signal from a hearing loop and transmit it via Bluetooth to the user's hearing aids. According to the

Starkey website the Plus model will also receive and transmit an FM signal to compatible Starkey hearing aids. In some descriptions on their website Starkey does not specifically mention the telecoil feature in the Plus and where they do they refer to “teleloop” which might be confusing to some researching the devices.

Oticon is another brand offering a telecoil equipped remote device but it would probably not be suggested unless you specifically asked for it. Like the Starkey Mini Remote, the Oticon ConnectClip does not have a telecoil nor is it capable of connection to a FM assistive listening system’s signal. You must ask for the EduMic to get those features and others such as an unlimited number of hearing aids connected to it and a jack to input audio directly from a smartphone, mp3 player or whatever. Resound and Lively are two other brands who offer remote mics that feature telecoils.

Some other brands also reportedly offer remote mics fitted with a telecoil but that doesn't mean buyers of the devices will be told about the included telecoil any more than they were told about telecoils before being fitted with hearing aids that did or did not contain telecoils. Wearers of newer model hearing aids without telecoils can possibly resolve their hearing loop connectivity problem by investing in such a mic from their provider or an online source such as Amazon. The appropriate Starkey mic sells there for around \$400 in this country but for \$225 (when in stock) at the German online hearing aid dealer named MySecondEar.com.

Looping Lincoln Center

Geffen Hall joins the David Rubenstein Atrium, and the Mitzi Newhouse and Vivian Beaumont Theaters in offering this popular assistive listening technology ...

Geffen Hall, previously known as Avery Fisher Hall and one of three equally large performing arts halls at Lincoln center, is the home to the New York Philharmonic and the venue for many other major music presentations in New York City. The concert season just beginning finds the hall to be the latest venue at Lincoln Center to adopt hearing loop technology to better serve the needs of people with hearing loss. The buildings housing the New York City and the Metropolitan Opera do not offer hearing loops but Geffen Hall joins the David Rubenstein Atrium and the Mitzi Newhouse and Vivian Beaumont Theaters in offering this popular assistive listening technology to patrons rather than the less user friendly FM or Infrared systems.

Demonstrating a less than complete understanding of this new technology, in adding it to the list of accessibility accommodations the theater offers, they say, “Headsets and loops are available at the Head Usher’s Podium located on the Grand Promenade of David Geffen Hall.” As is common for such accommodations, a credit card or driver’s license is needed as a security deposit. The loops are not confined to the auditorium (differing from the name of the hall and named the Wu Tsai Theater) itself, they are also installed in Griffin Sidewalk Studio, Digital Wall, Music Box and Patron’s Lounge. They are also found in commerce points, including Welcome Center’s Box Office, Coat Check, the Lobby Bar and the First Republic Bar on the Grand Promenade. Patrons without telecoil-enabled hearing devices can borrow **receivers with headsets** from the Welcome Center and Head Usher Podium as can all guests seated in tiers 2 and 3 (which are not looped).

Signage and other means of alerting concertgoers to the new hearing loop technology in the hall is meager, consisting of small looped venue signs at the ticket counters, so looping advocates are now pressing the administrations of both Geffen Hall and the resident New York Philharmonic to take a variety of actions to address that problem.

Hearing care researchers endorse telecoils

... as this remains the most widespread and effective way to hear well in public spaces.

A reliable source has reported that nearly 450 offices of audiologists, hearing instrument specialists and ENTs are known to have hearing loops installed in them. They are also increasingly adding loop/telecoil information to their websites. Another sign of the growing support for the technology was reported in new fall edition of *Audiology Practices* where a report on best practices entitled Guidelines for Best Practice in the Audiological Management of Adults with Severe and Profound Hearing Loss (Turton et al. 2020) was quoted as saying, "Unless contraindicated, the hearing care professional should activate the telecoil function for the patient...and arrange for the client to experience a good working inductive loop, as this remains the most widespread and effective way to hear well in public spaces." This reference was included in a very detailed [six page article](#) on a study done on the benefits of remote microphones and of hearing loops to adults with a severe hearing loss.

In reporting their findings, the authors reported, "In our studies, we found that remote microphones and hearing loops each significantly improved distant speech recognition in noise when compared to hearing aids alone. Our participants, who used either CIC or Power Plus BTE style hearing aids, strongly preferred the telecoil function in combination with a hearing loop over listening with the standard hearing aid microphone setting for various types of audio, even in an auditorium with professional sound design. These observations validate the recommendation of assistive listening systems for hearing aids, even for individuals with more mild degrees of hearing loss. In our studies, we found that remote microphones and hearing loops each significantly improved distant speech recognition in noise when compared to hearing aids alone."

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If a friend or associate forwarded this newsletter to you and you would like to be added to the mailing list for future editions, send your request to the address above and you'll be in the loop.

Submissions are welcome from any of the private individuals, hearing care providers or looping advocates in addition to loop installers, distributors and manufacturers receiving this newsletter.

If you are aware of a newsworthy story regarding hearing loops, neckloops or telecoils and would like to have it considered for publication in a future edition of this newsletter, please the details to the email address below.

Send the details to: intheloop@juno.com.

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