

ROADMAP TO A LOOPED COMMUNITY

BY JULIETTE STERKENS

If all audiologists would foster one or two loop installations, we could make this technology universally known as the wheelchair ramps for hearing aid users. By being an advocate for your clients, you will be known in your community, not only as an expert provider of hearing care but also as one who promotes and advocates for better living.



an audiologist in private practice, I have helped my clients navigate the different hearing aid technologies on the market. Hearing aids have made improvements in the last 10 years that resulted in better feedback suppression, improved speech understanding in quiet, reduced occlusion, and a reduction in loud background noise complaints. This made it exciting to work in my chosen field. Yet even with the best and most advanced technology, patients continued to complain about their inability to hear in many public places. After spending time with several clients, many of whom became dear friends after seeing them professionally for some 25 years, I observed their struggles firsthand. Particularly in situations where my clients wanted to hear their best (houses of worship, high school theaters, and large meeting rooms) the hearing aids I so carefully fit were unable to deliver.

Wireless hearing aid systems, designed to be used at home with TV and cell phone signals, made a difference for only a few of my clients. While the streamer and clip-on mic looked cool and neat in the office, many of my clients did not take to using them on a daily basis. Streamers, I found,

could be “temperamental” and sometimes would cut off the Bluetooth® signals from cell phones for no apparent reason, and linking to computers was even trickier. Sure, my patients sat patiently in my office while I tried to reboot, link, and pair the devices with cell phones. They appreciated that I called the hearing aid manufacturers’ tech support, but it did not allay their fears that they could handle this technology at home. And too many of them walked back into my office only a few weeks later with the wireless peripherals in a bag, apologetically explaining, “I tried it, doc, but they are too much hassle” or “I could not get them to work at home.”

I am convinced that I am not the only audiologist to have experienced problems with these advanced devices. An audiologist in a large multilocation private practice told me, “I have a drawer full of clip-on mics, as they come included with many of our orders, but I cannot give them away.” A sales representative from one of the larger hearing aid manufacturers told me that in his territory, only between 10 and 15 percent of all wireless hearing aids are ordered with the wireless devices such as clip-on mics and TV devices. If clients are

not using these devices, we cannot help them in the situations they came to see us for in the first place.

A Solution for the Nontechnical

There is a solution for places where hearing aids do not work. This solution is a system that does not require linking, pairing, charging, or the use of a peripheral device. This solution is a system that makes clients open to exploring other assistive technologies and will help set realistic expectations, and has motivated clients to speak up for themselves. Hearing loops are this system. Hearing loops are able to help our clients hear better in some venues than their normal hearing spouses beside them. This system is easy to use and does not consume battery power. This can come through the touch of a button, through hearing aids they are already wearing in their ears, provided you had the foresight to fit them with telecoils in the first place.

Why Hearing Loops Work

To fully understand why our clients respond positively to hearing loops, it is important to understand what a loop does for them. The hearing loop transforms the microphone that is used on the lectern, or the pulpit, or worn on the ear of an actor on stage directly into the microphone of the hearing aid. It is as if the user has his or her ear just inches away from the mouth of the speaker. The result is a dramatic improvement in signal-to-noise ratio on the order of 15–25 dB, an improvement that can never be obtained with hearing aids alone. Even the most advanced hearing aids improve SNR less than 3–5 dB in the real world and not the effortless listening our clients crave.

Hearing in a hearing loop exceeds user expectations, and this makes our clients happy, very happy. Imagine sitting in your office talking to an enthusiastic client who just cannot get over how well his telecoil-equipped hearing aid was able to make him hear in a looped theater, lecture room, or church service? Read more to learn how you can help get your community in the loop.

Loop Your Office

Looping a waiting room or a patient room can usually be accomplished in an hour or two, and several Web sites give details how to install the wire or seat cushion loop to a computer or TV (www.hearinglosshelp.com). Invite a local hearing loop installer to verify the field strength of the loop, that way you can be certain that the telecoils set properly. Request that the manufacturers provide you with the SPLIV telecoil test results. A SPLIV telecoil test lets you see at a glance if the microphone and telecoil settings match and whether the telecoil is vertically oriented.

Several Web sites offer great step-by-step directions on how to connect a TV or computer to a loop. A TV loop driver with a volume control is recommended. This allows the audiologist or front staff to quickly demonstrate TV loop “on” versus “off” in a waiting room when the hearing aid is set to M+T. These demonstrations are fun and often get other clients in the waiting room talking and interested in looping. Many of my clients’ out-of-town family members have taken materials home to share with ministers in their hometowns. This is where advocating for all people with hearing loss begins.

Once your clients have experienced a loop in your waiting room and your community has facilities with hearing loops such as houses of worship or meeting rooms you will want to send them to try out the loop. Be sure to personally verify with a programmed hearing aid that the loops in these locations are working well before sending clients to try it out.

Educational materials that help explain hearing loops can be found on the Academy’s Web site under the “Get in the Loop Campaign” (www.audiology.org/resources/consumer/pages/get_in_thehearingloop.aspx). Place hearing loop information in your waiting room or set up a TV loop in your waiting room, so your patients can experience the system while they wait for their appointments.

Educate Your Community

Hearing loops help increase awareness of the needs of people with hearing loss. By explaining to our patients what hearing loss is and the limitations of hearing aids, especially in reverberant and large, noisy environments, we can demonstrate how hearing loops can provide seamless access in these situations. You can also offer to give a “Get in the Loop” lecture to service clubs, local HLAA chapters, or a senior center. If you are lucky to have a Sertoma (SERvice TO MAnkind) club in your area, you will find that they are very interested in this message. Sertoma recently started the Sound Investment Campaign, which focuses on improved access for the hard of hearing in the communities they serve.

Hearing aids help much like wheelchair ramps do for people with mobility handicaps. Using this mindset, it is easy to build the case and get support for hearing loops. PowerPoint presentations on looping are available on the Academy’s Web site or by e-mailing the author. A short newspaper article or a letter to the editor explaining how you and your practice want to bring the community “in the loop” can be very effective. Mary Caccavo, PhD, audiologist in Lafayette, IN, commented that she has been invited to speak at service clubs and regional professional conferences on the topic of looping. Dr. Caccavo says this

is “a visibility I would not have had if not for the simple truth of having something of importance to say.”

Financing of the hearing loops often comes from generous donations from the local community. A couple of years ago I gave a lunch presentation at local Rotary club. Afterwards someone came up to me and offered to, anonymously, donate the funds to fund a loop installation at a local theater that happened to be undergoing renovations at that time. I danced all the way back to office after that lunch meeting knowing that my patients would benefit. Other loops were financed with Community Foundation donations, or by clients who wanted to give back to their local church or favorite charity. One older client, sadly, did not live to see her fondest wish to have a loop installed in her church come to fruition. Thanks to my client’s children, her memorial funds were given to the church and earmarked “Hearing Loop Fund.” A year later, the loop was installed much to the delight of many hard-of-hearing members.

Foster Installation

By actively being involved in the successful installation and promotion of a hearing loop in a large facility, you

Many installers will provide advocacy materials for your office and may invite you to speak as the local professional at loop commissioning or dedication events.

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The image features a large graphic for the Audiology Solutions Network. On the left is a stylized logo consisting of a semi-circle of dots in shades of blue and yellow. To its right, the text 'audiology solutions network' is written in a blue, sans-serif font. Below this, a blue text block describes the website as a dynamic resource directory for audiology professionals, listing features like profiles, videos, social media, and live events. The website URL is provided. On the right side of the graphic is a screenshot of the website's homepage, showing a navigation menu, a search bar, and various content sections. At the bottom of the graphic, the American Academy of Audiology logo is displayed, featuring the text 'AMERICAN ACADEMY OF AUDIOLOGY' and a stylized blue waveform icon.

will be seen as a community-minded audiologist and the go-to person for questions regarding hearing access. Many success stories about audiologists who have done just that can be found on the Internet. Several audiologists have fostered a relationship with local installers to loop their community. Whether you are advocating on behalf of your clients or are considering a monetary donation to loop a particular venue as part of your marketing budget, be sure to visit several of the loop installer's jobs and listen with a telecoil-equipped hearing aid for yourself. You will find that the time you have spent sorting out a good hearing-loop installer from less capable ones is time well spent. Vendors should offer information on their Web sites regarding recent loop installations and be willing to give you references of past installations. To find a list of hearing loop vendors by state visit www.hearingloop.org/vendors.html.

Some audio engineers are new to hearing loop technology. This need not be a detriment. With technical design support from their suppliers they can quickly get up to speed on installation techniques. The International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC 60118-4) standard ensures that hearing loops are properly configured and work well with the hearing instruments. They make sure spillover, interference with other electronic equipment, and head tilt are all considered. This will provide your clients with clear, strong signals wherever they sit.

Are some loop installations more difficult and costly to complete than others? The answer is yes. Some loop installations, notably the phased array loops can cost two or three times more than a conventional perimeter loop. It takes an ethical installer, who, sensitive to the ultimate end users—our clients—and concerned about maintaining the reputation of hearing loops, will refuse to install a loop that he or she knows will not meet the standard or is beyond his or her capabilities. Insist that the hearing

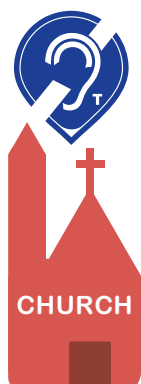
loops you commission or help fund as part of your marketing strategy, meet this standard. A handout on how to purchase a hearing loop and how you can verify its performance can be found here: www.loopwisconsin.info/pdffiles/looppurchase.pdf.

Many local installers are willing to work closely with hearing-care providers by providing generic advocacy materials to hand out in your office, and may invite you to speak as the local professional at hearing loop commissioning or dedication events. Hearing-loop installers, who are not familiar with hearing aids, will defer to you for hearing aid questions or invite you to listen to the hearing-loop performance. Installers have been known to install a temporary hearing loop for consumer looping seminars knowing that such an event often leads to more installations. This is good for all involved.


Make Sure the Loop Is Working Well

This is easy. Always carry a hearing aid with a telecoil wherever you go. It allows you to listen to what it sounds like if you were using the hearing aid in the acoustic mode versus the T or M+T setting. It also gives you the experience to give advice to sound board technicians or theater operators regarding the working of the loop. As with all assistive listening technology, be it FM, Infrared, or inductive, if the signal feeding it is of poor quality (e.g., noisy, reverberant, distorted, and muffled), then the sound that a user of the system hears will also be of poor quality. I speak up for my clients. I believe that the sorry state of many ALS systems in this country is because we have dropped the ball and have failed to be strong advocates for better assistive hearing systems on behalf of our clients.

A couple of years ago I took my mother, who uses hearing instruments, to a Thanksgiving prayer service at a recently looped local theater. When I sat down I was



greeted by at least a half dozen clients in the seats around me. Some waved and some pointed to their hearing aids and smiled when I motioned and nodded to their querying faces that, yes, the loop would be working. I put in my own hearing aid as well just before the service started, only to find out, much to my dismay, that the sound from the mics on stage was not being routed through the loop. I was not the only who noticed; my mom was disappointed about her first use of a public loop, as were the half dozen clients who were in the theater with me. I took the time to send a letter to the manager of the theater explaining my mother's and my clients' disappointment. A change in procedures at the theater meant that the loop at this year's Thanksgiving event worked flawlessly.

If all audiologists would foster one or two loop installations, we could make this technology universally known as the wheelchair ramps for hearing aid users. By being an advocate for your clients, you will be known in your community not only as an expert provider of hearing care but also as one who promotes and advocates for better living. Choose a house of worship or a public venue your clients frequent and get started! Hearing loops beget hearing loops. Our collective effort to make assistive listening directly hearing-aid compatible will lead to greater increased consumer satisfaction with hearing instruments and show we truly care for America's hearing. 

Juliette P.M. Sterkens, AuD, is a HLAA member and hearing loop advocate. Thanks to a grant from the Carol and David Myers Family Foundation, the writer of this article is currently on a sabbatical from her audiology practice to advocate for the installation of hearing loops on behalf of all people with hearing loss. She welcomes invitations to speak at state conferences and AuD programs. Her involvement has led to over 300 hearing loop installations in Wisconsin and many more beyond the state borders. Dr. Sterkens can be reached at jsterkens@new.rr.com.



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