

SERTOMANS



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HEARING LOOP INSTALLED Switch hearing aid to T-coil

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Sertomans in Madison, Wisconsin are definitely “in the loop” when it comes to improving the lives of hearing impaired individuals. That’s because the 24 members of the Madison Sertoma Club have embarked on a great mission to bring induction-loop technology to the community’s hearing impaired with two pilot projects as part of the Club’s *A Sound Investment* campaign. Thirty-one guests, including Sertoma club members, local audiology professionals, audiology students from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and representatives of proposed locations for the induction-loop installations attended the Club’s kick-off educational event on May 27. Attendees enjoyed a social hour and buffet

dinner and then received an in-depth education on induction-loop technology from Dr. Juliette Sterkens, an audiologist whose efforts to promote the superior benefits of hearing loop technology have snowballed into over 40 large looping installations in the Fox Valley area of central Wisconsin and serious inquiries coming in almost daily.

According to outgoing Club President Chris Noffke, this campaign is a natural fit with the Club’s speech and communications goals. “We were looking for a new project when Juliette approached us about putting together a campaign to bring induction-looping to the community,” said Noffke. “After learning about the technology and how it offers such great benefits to people with hearing aids and cochlear implants, our Club confirmed the project.”

So, what exactly is induction-loop technology? Think of it as a Wi-Fi broadcast system delivered through hearing aids. While a hearing aid works well when conversations take place or sounds occur in small, rather quiet and intimate settings, it doesn’t mask background noise or filter echoes. In large buildings with poor acoustics like an airport, auditorium or church, a hearing aid simply amplifies all the background noise and echoes, making it very difficult for an individual wearing the aid to hear public announcements, stage presentations or worship services. Through the use of a telecoil (or t-coil) built into hearing aids and conductive wire looped around a building or public facility, a hearing aid wearer can pick up crystal clear sounds and speech broadcast by public address systems or microphones by simply pressing a button built into the hearing aid to activate the device’s t-coil. There’s no need for a hearing impaired individual to seek out and wear conspicuous hearing assistive devices or juggle between headsets and hearing aids and no hygienic concerns about

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putting a device in or on one's ear that has been in or on someone else's ear.

Induction-loop technology is not new. In fact, it's been around for over half a century. What is new is development of improved amplifier and t-coil technologies and computer-modeled designs for complex installations. What's also new is the growing use of induction-loop technology in the United States.

Sterkens' passion for induction looping came after hearing Dr. David Myers speak in 2008. Myers, a hearing impaired professor of psychology at Hope College in Holland, Michigan and outspoken advocate for induction-loop technology, first experienced its benefits over ten years ago while worshipping in Scotland's Iona Abbey. In an effort to help him better hear the worship service being conducted in the 800-year-old stone building, Myers' wife suggested he try switching on the "T" (for telecoil) setting on his hearing aid. The sudden clarity with which Myers could hear every spoken word and note of music during the service was an overwhelming experience. And it was an experience he later repeated in countless venues across Scotland and Great Britain, from auditoriums to cathedrals to the backseats of taxicabs.

But if induction-looping technology creates such hearing miracles, why is it just beginning to gain ground in the United States? Part of the reason lies in application of the reasonable accommodations provisions contained in disability laws passed in the U.S. and United Kingdom. Across the pond, looping technology was embraced as the means by which the needs of the hearing impaired should be accommodated in public venues. As a result, hosts of venues large and small across the United Kingdom (and in Scandinavian countries to its north) display familiar blue signs that indicate the presence

of hearing loop systems. But on this side of the Atlantic, guidelines established under the Americans with Disabilities Act support the ADA's position that no single approach works for every person, in every venue. As a result, venues in the United States can comply with the law by offering FM or infrared systems, both of which Myers characterizes as "hearing aid incompatible technology" and require individuals to seek out and wear borrowed headsets to access the systems' benefits.

Another reason hearing loop systems are just beginning to gain traction here may be found in the cost of installation, particularly in large venues where the looping wire must be installed into existing concrete or stone. At the low end, installing an induction loop system into a home TV room is relatively inexpensive, running from as little as \$140 up to about \$300. A small to mid-size church can run \$2,000 to \$8,000. But installing the system into a large concrete or stone venue (such as an airport or cathedral) easily goes into six figures. The price tag for an induction-looping system installed in two concourses and 12 passenger gates areas at Gerald R. Ford International Airport in Grand Rapids, Michigan ran \$137,000. So while the system offers greater convenience and long-term cost savings by eliminating the need for a facility to purchase and maintain headsets and other equipment required for FM or infrared technology, it's easy to see how the upfront costs of installing an induction-looping system can be a deterrent. And here's where we come back to the Madison Sertoma Club.

After committing to help bring induction-looping technology to the Madison community, the Club looked at possible sites in which the system might generate the greatest benefits to the largest numbers of hearing impaired individuals. At this time, two sites in Madison have been

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tentatively selected: the Goodman Community Center and Oakwood Village, a retirement community. Goodman Community Center was selected because it offers a senior program and has an established relationship with the Club through past projects. Oakwood Village was selected because of its large senior population, half of which experience some level of hearing impairment to the degree that Oakwood Village employs the services of an on-site audiologist. Final decision on the sites and specific areas of the facilities in which the looping systems will be installed will be made by the Club later this fall.

Noffke says that the Club's intention is to pay the entire cost of the first two installations and then set up a grant program through which the Club will cover a portion of installation costs in other facilities. And since the greatest portion of installation costs comes from the manpower and time it takes to install the looping wire, Noffke sees local expertise in that area as essential to controlling installation costs. Currently, that expertise is not available in Madison but through a partnership the Club has created with a local electrical contractor, it may soon be available. "Hill Electric here in Madison wants to expand its services and we want to have a local company with expertise in looping installations," said Noffke. "Through this partnership, Hill Electric can develop that expertise and, in fact, they've indicated they might even do the first installation free of charge as a training exercise."

Although supporting installation of looping systems can be an expensive undertaking, the Club feels confident it will have the resources to launch the pilot projects and provide grant funding of additional looping projects in the years to come. Thanks to responsible stewardship of its resources and two successful annual fundraisers – a Bowlathon and Raffle generate about \$9,000 each year - the Club is positioned to launch and sustain its campaign. "Our Club is pretty frugal when it comes to spending the money we raise and we make sure that every expenditure directly supports our mission," said Noffke. "Now that our SHARP campaign is self-sustaining, we are confident

we'll have the support of our members and the financial resources we need to sustain this new and exciting campaign."

As with any new undertaking, launching its *A Sound Investment* campaign has produced a few bumps along the road and lessons learned. The Club held its kick-off educational event on the Thursday evening before the Memorial Day weekend. Noffke says that, in hindsight, holding this event farther away from a holiday weekend likely would have generated higher attendance. The other lesson he says he has learned is to avoid kicking off a new campaign just before a Club takes a break. The Madison Sertoma Club meets semi-monthly except during the months of July and August when the Club takes a summer break. After its May 27 educational event, the Club met in June to confirm its participation in the campaign and begin working out details of the projects. But things came to a standstill during the Club's July-August break and Noffke believes some momentum and energy have been lost as a result. Although he is confident that momentum and energy will be quickly restored when the Club reconvenes in September, Noffke advises Clubs considering their own campaigns to avoid delays like this and to channel their energy "to something that's do-able right away".

Finally, for Sertomans who wonder about the benefits of induction-looping technology, there's a great example in a July 2nd interview done by Dr. David Myers with Ira Flatow of National Public Radio. You can hear the entire interview, including examples of sounds transmitted through hearing aids with a hearing loop system and without such a system, at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128268480>

Sertoma congratulates the members of the Madison Sertoma Club for their outstanding work. For more information on induction-looping technology or advice on starting *A Sound Investment* campaign in your community, contact Holly Walls at Sertoma Headquarters (hwalls@sertomahq.org) or visit the Hearing Charities of America website at www.hearingcharities.org.