

Assistive Listening Systems & Your Right to Hear

By Stephen Frazier

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) stresses that people with hearing loss have the same right to hear well in places of assembly as people with normal hearing. If a venue has a public address system, a hearing aid-compatible assistive listening system (ALS) must also be available. If you have hearing loss, stay up-to-date on technological advancements and regulations to ensure your access to sound in public settings.

WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF ALSs?

HEARING LOOPS. In its simplest form, a hearing loop is a discreetly hidden wire surrounding a seating area. When plugged into an amplifier that is connected to a PA system, the loop transmits the PA system sound as a silent electromagnetic signal that is received by wire coils called telecoils, which are found in most hearing aid models today. The hearing aids with an activated telecoil can turn that signal back into sound.

RF SYSTEMS. These systems transmit sound via radio waves to a receiver and earphones, which you can borrow in various public venues. Like a miniature radio, the receiver captures the radio signal and sends it to the user's ears via the earphones. To meet the ADA hearing aid compatibility mandate, all RF systems installed, or significantly upgraded since 2012, pair 25 percent of receivers with neckloops instead of earphones. When plugged into the receiver, the neckloop becomes a miniature hearing loop, transmitting sound electromagnetically to hearing aid telecoils.

IR SYSTEMS. These transmit sound via invisible light beams that are converted into sound in the same manner as in RF systems.

WiFi SYSTEMS. Audio streaming delivers sound through an existing WiFi network to smartphones or tablets via an appropriate app. While these are getting more popular, they do not meet the ADA standards for an ALS because venues that offer them require users to use their own smartphones as receivers.

WHAT ARE BENEFITS OF ALSs?

A recent survey found that hearing aid users are six times more likely to use a hearing loop system than other ALS options in a public venue because it eliminates the need to borrow and return devices and remove their hearing aids to access the system. It also eliminates any hygienic concern over using borrowed devices. Furthermore, user's hearing aids customize the sound to match the pattern of their audiogram—something earphones cannot do.

Beyond the benefits unique to hearing loop systems, any ALS separates sounds that users want to hear, such as speech from background noise. By using earphones or turning off their hearing aid mics, users eliminate much of the reverberation, ventilation hum, and other sounds that may interfere with their ability to discern words, improving the speech-to-noise ratio.

HOW DO I FIND AND ACCESS AN ALS?

The ADA requires the placement of ALS signage (blue international symbol; see above) in venues with an available system. Look for the symbol at performing arts halls, transportation hubs, legislative chambers, and any place where people assemble that uses a PA system. If you see this sign, inquire at the box office or information desk about the type of system available. If a hearing loop is available and you have telecoils, simply turn them on. You can also borrow a small telecoil-equipped receiver and earphones to access the loop. If an RF or IR is available, borrow a receiver and earphones or a neckloop. Places of worship are the No. 1 location with ALSs but, because the ADA does not usually apply to these venues, you may not see any signage. Ask an official if a hearing loop is available. Venues with RF or IR systems must offer users the choice of earphones or a neckloop.

You can become an advocate for hearing loops. Talk to leaders at your place of worship, city council, and local performing arts center about installing a hearing loop. Encourage leaders and other hearing health advocates to learn more about the technology and how to go about looping a venue. For more information, visit these resources: www.Hearing-loss.org, www.hearingloop.org, www.alocator.com/, and www.time2loopamerica.com/loop-locator/.



Mr. Frazier is a trained hearing loss support specialist and a freelance writer. He co-chairs the Committee for Communication Access in New Mexico and heads the Loop New Mexico clearinghouse. He is a former New Mexico chapter coordinator of the Hearing Loss Association of America and served on the board of the New Mexico Speech-Language Pathology, Audiology, and Hearing Aid Dispensing Practices for many years. Learn more about his work at www.LoopNM.com, www.CCAnm.com, www.SOFNABQ.com, and connect with him at InTheLoop@juno.com.