

Loop Oregon

An Initiative of

The John G. Shedd Institute for the Arts

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A survey of 50 of Oregon's largest meeting facilities about their provision of assistive listening systems as required by the ADA

What We Did

The John G. Shedd Institute for the Arts in Eugene sponsors the Loop Oregon Committee. This volunteer committee is a group of people with hearing loss and their allies. We are working to ensure that people with hearing loss can participate fully in public places, i.e., as the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] specifies, using the accommodations that allow them to hear as well as people with typical hearing.

Having received numerous anecdotal experiences, both positive and challenging, regarding hearing access in public meeting facilities, we were interested in testing these impressions more systematically and accurately.

Beginning in January 2024, using a 2023 list published by the Oregon Business Association of the 50 largest meeting facilities in the state, a subgroup of 5 members of the Loop Oregon Committee conducted a survey. We set out to learn how these 50 facilities accommodate people with hearing loss. Our plan was, first, to explore their websites for any information we could find, and then call each place and ask the following:

- What is your assistive listening system?
- How do people learn it exists?
- Do people use it? And like it?
- Are workers in your facility trained about your assistive listening system?
- How often do you test/maintain the system?

We developed an interview script with the above questions and a few more, so that our interviewers would generate consistent information. We embarked on our informal study with optimism, but soon discovered we rarely got past the first question. We'll explain.

Why We Did This

Updated in 2010, the 1990 ADA Standards for Accessible Design at section 219 require assistive listening systems in spaces where "...audible communication is integral to the space" and audio amplification is provided, as well as in courtrooms. Moreover, per section 706.3, systems other than hearing loops must provide hearing aid compatible receivers that interface with the user's telecoil in their hearing instrument. For hearing loops, no additional hearing aid compatible receivers are required because the user already has the receiver (the telecoil) built into their hearing aid.

Furthermore, the ADA also includes assistive listening systems under "Effective Communication" for when people have difficulties at service counters and rooms that don't already have amplification. Title II and Title III entities covered under the ADA must provide auxiliary aids and services when needed to communicate effectively with people with communication disabilities.

Additionally, a Title II entity cannot contract away its responsibilities under the ADA, and both Title II and Title III entities are responsible for ensuring effective communication. Title II and III entities are responsible for paying for auxiliary aids and services.

Of the three types of ADA-compliant assistive listening systems (RF/FM, infrared, and hearing loop), the Loop Oregon Committee recommends the use of hearing loops which research shows is the system vastly preferred by people who use hearing aids and cochlear implants. Hearing loops are preferred in both large public settings as well as in more private 1:1 commercial and professional settings for their ease of use, privacy, universality, and because they require no additional equipment for the listener to use.

Since 2017, Loop Oregon has been identifying Oregon locations that use hearing loops as their assistive listening system. We make sure they are added to the new Google Maps accessibility feature, so that people with hearing loss can locate them. We anticipated adding more meeting facilities to this national list as a result of this survey.

What We Found

In summary, of the 50 sites on the Oregon Business list:

- 2 had changed hands and were no longer public meeting spaces.
- 14 never responded to multiple phone calls, emails, and website requests.
- 2 reported having a hearing loop.
- 6 reported another assistive listening system but weren't sure what it was.
- 1 stated that their concert hall acoustics were so good nothing was needed.
- 1 offers earplugs when it gets loud.
- 26 replied that they have no assistive listening system or accommodations.
- 7 told us it was the renter's responsibility, not the facility's, to provide the assistive listening system or accommodations.

What the Websites Had to Say

We began our research with each facility's website to seek information posted about accessibility, either under a tab specifically titled "accessibility" or something like "plan your visit". For most of the websites we had to dig much deeper or try the search function. Those that listed information typically detailed their accommodations for visitors with mobility, behavioral or sensory needs, but had very little information about accommodations for hearing loss. We found no accessibility information whatsoever on 24 of the websites.

Interestingly, 6 sites mentioned work underway to make their website itself more accessible but offered no information about how their patrons might be accommodated once at the facility. Some offered lots of details about their efforts on behalf of people with physical disabilities or behavioral needs for accommodation. But only 14 specifically mentioned anything related to the needs of people with hearing loss. Of these:

- 2 said they required advance notice (usually 2 weeks) for access to hearing assistance.
- 6 focused on lodging accommodations (such as visual door knockers, shaking bed alarms, TVs with closed captioning) and a couple mentioned having staff who knew sign language.
- 4 claimed to have a functioning hearing assist system.
- 1 mentioned having a hearing loop in use.

What We Were Told

We were unable to gather information for 14 of the sites. We made multiple calls, left voicemails, sent emails in some cases, tried all the extensions mentioned in the opening recording, and still nothing. The remaining 34 told us lots of different things.

A few conversations were quite short. When we asked about accommodation for people with hearing loss, we were quickly told “We don’t offer that,” with no invitation to continue the conversation. It was simply a matter of fact, or “cut and dried” as one in our group noted. Just “No”.

Many other staff we talked to were eager to be helpful. They would quickly check their website. Others referred or transferred us to another person they thought might know more. Some fumbled around looking for how to be helpful but were really confused. One group member reported that people she spoke to were nice, but “clueless” about the issue. It wasn’t clear if they were just unfamiliar with hearing loss, or had never been asked such a question before, but in the end, they had little information.

Several people told us they *wished* they had something for visitors with hearing loss and thought maybe they should. A couple talked about personally knowing someone with hearing loss and appreciated how hard it was for them to hear in places like theirs, but “No. We have nothing.”

Seven of the facilities we talked to firmly told us that they “... just rent out the space. It is the responsibility of the people putting on the event to provide any accommodation needed.” Some in this group told us that figuring out what was needed was “too specific to each event,” but they were more than willing to help connect us to the responsible people for any specific event.

Six of the 48 facilities reported having accommodation for visitors with hearing loss. In some cases, the person we talked to didn’t understand the issue or the system, but they could read to us what we had already learned from their website. For example, visitors should bring “AUX compatible headphones.” Sometimes even if we talked to several staff people, we couldn’t figure out exactly which system they had. Nevertheless, they at least had something.

Four of these 6 sites reported meeting “all the requirements of the ADA” with their current systems. One site reported they had 4 FM packs to lend out for meetings, but that their “concert space had such good acoustics that nothing was really needed.”

Two commented that they were still trying to improve their system. They reported issues such as people being uncomfortable using the loaned receiver pack and headphones because they might not be sanitary enough. Others said they got reports of receivers not working well for some participants, and they were actively searching for ways to improve their accommodation. A couple even mentioned hearing loops and had some interest in exploring a hearing loop as an alternative. Lastly, one site reported that when it gets loud, “We offer earplugs... but that probably isn’t helpful.”

We learned that most staff we spoke with were confused about hearing loss in general. They assumed we were referring to people who are Deaf (i.e. those who have no functional hearing at all) and would discuss providing ASL interpreters or closed captioning. One person felt that, in his experience, people with deafness/hearing loss simply preferred captions.

What We Learned

We learned that even when staff know about the need to provide accessibility for visitors with physical disabilities (ramps, elevators, braille), they don't believe there are any legal requirements for people with hearing loss. We learned that they didn't consider helping people with hearing loss to participate was even their responsibility—it was someone else's.

We learned that the customer service and administrative staff at most of these large meeting facilities know little, if anything, about assistive listening system options auxiliary aids and services, and how they operate.

We learned that only a couple of people we talked to knew about hearing loops but didn't realize that they are ADA-compliant and are preferred by most people who use hearing aids or cochlear implants.

We learned that many who work at these facilities report that they've only had very few requests for hearing accommodations. Consequently, they don't think it's much of an issue.

What Comes Next

This research underscores that there remains a great deal of advocacy work to do:

- To educate the responsible entities who build and manage public facilities about their ADA-compliance requirements for people with hearing loss and the range of options.
- To remind facility managers that hearing loss is invisible. Consequently, they need to assume that 20% or more of their guests have some degree of hearing loss and would benefit from assistive listening systems.
- To educate people with hearing loss about what they are entitled to under the ADA as they navigate public settings, how to be sure their needs for effective communication are met, and what to do if they are not.
- To support and encourage people with hearing loss and their allies to demand that public facilities take accommodations for people with hearing loss seriously.
- To assure that any new technology meets the ADA compliance standards regarding hearing aid and cochlear implant compatibility.
- To conduct additional surveys of covered entities, such as courtrooms and live performance venues.