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HearingLoop makes it easier for people to hear in crowded places

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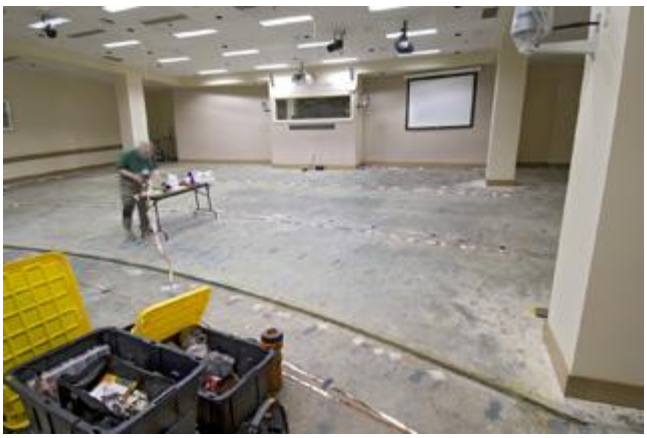

Photo by Taylor Ubben/Virginia Mason Medical Center [enlarge]
Spencer Norby, owner of HearingLoop NW, installed the system under carpeting in an auditorium at Virginia Mason.

Virginia Mason Medical Center has installed a new system in one of its Seattle buildings to help people who are hard of hearing.

The audio-frequency induction loop system, or hearing "loop," is in the Volney Richmond Auditorium on First Hill.

The loop is a copper wire laid under the carpet. It gives off an electromagnetic signal that can be picked up by a receiver in most hearing aids and cochlear implants. The hearing devices receive only sounds coming from a microphone, not all the distracting background noises.

"The competing sounds go away and you just get a direct connection to the speaker," said Karen Utter, president of the Hearing Loss Association of Washington, which represents people with hearing loss who continue to speak.

The loops are common in parts of Europe, but not in the United States. But Utter said there is a growing movement to get them in more places here, and some public agencies — such as subway systems — have installed them.

Fewer than 25 places — mostly churches — in the Puget Sound region have the loops, but proponents

see demand increasing as more younger people suffer hearing loss and as the nation ages.

Thirty-six million Americans have hearing loss, a total that includes teenagers who listen to loud music through earbuds, Utter said. Sixty percent of people with hearing loss are between 21 and 65, she said.

Utter's hearing loss started in her 20s. Before she got a cochlear implant (or bionic ear, as she calls it), she was deaf in one ear and had profound hearing loss in the other.

But even with the implant, background noise interferes with her hearing, both in large gatherings and conversations.

Having people talk louder doesn't help. “When people speak loudly it distorts the words so it actually makes understanding worse,” she said. “Clarity is the issue. It's not loudness.”

Last June, Utter visited the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., for a performance of the musical “Wicked.” The center installed the hearing loop on a temporary basis as a demonstration.

“It was wonderful,” she said. “I never heard so good in my life.”

Some government agencies in the U.S. already use other systems to help people who are hard of hearing, but they require special receivers and a neck loop. The hearing loop doesn't.

Utter said the loop could be installed in public spaces as well as banks, pharmacies or ticket counters where people want to have one-on-one conversations.

She said a builder in Arizona is putting the system into dens of houses in a retirement community.

People from a local retirement community are among the groups that have checked out Virginia Mason's hearing loop, said Christa Quekett, an audiologist with the medical center.

“We have a lot of people coming over to demonstrate it from other facilities,” she said.

Spencer Norby, owner of HearingLoop NW, installed the loop at Virginia Mason.

Installation costs vary, he said, depending on the size of the space and the amount of metal nearby, because metal blocks the electromagnetic signal.

It cost $7,000 to install the system in the 2,400-square-foot, 189-seat auditorium, according to a Virginia Mason spokesman.

Putting the loop in a 2,300-square-foot church cost $4,000 to $5,000, Norby said. He is charging $7,000 to install the system in the performance hall of a retirement home that is the same size as the church because he has to work around steel.

It costs about $1,900 to install the technology in a 2,400-square-foot home, or $600 in a family room, he said.

Norby hides the wiring in architectural details such as crown molding. He said a house can be prewired during construction and the amplifier added later.

The system is not appropriate for spaces where ground wiring is improperly installed, or that have

inexpensive florescent lights or dimmers, he said. Those spaces have too much electromagnetic interference.

Norby hasn't installed the technology in new commercial or multifamily buildings, but said it could be easily done.

He sees it as a great marketing tool for retirement communities. Residents would know it's there even if they don't need it when they move in, he said.

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