

March 9, 2022

Dear Members of the House Health Committee,

I want to thank this committee for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you. I know you all have been inundated with numbers and stats and demographics. I was thinking it might be helpful to give you an opportunity to walk in the shoes of someone with hearing loss. You see, Hearing Loss is personal to me.

I have had varying degrees of hearing loss all my life. I wear two hearing aids, one is five years old, the other is fourteen. I cannot afford to purchase updated ones. My (adult) son has unilateral deafness. He relies solely on his one hearing ear, but life would be a lot more accessible and safer if he had the hearing aid system that he is unable to afford. I also have a partner with progressive hearing loss. His hearing level at this point is severe to profound. As a Veteran he was fortunate to qualify to get hearing aids through the VA. Without this assistance, he would not have hearing aids. When he is not wearing his hearing aids, he is deaf. Completely deaf.

Hearing Loss may be invisible to you and others, but to those of us who struggle to engage and participate and contribute to our families and communities, it is difficult and personal, every day.

Here are some of the daily vulnerabilities we face when engaging in everyday life with a hearing disability:

- Lack of directional perception. (Think you hear something on the left when it is actually on the right. Or, being unable to detect what direction the noise/danger is coming from.)
- Not hearing a shouted warning. (i.e., bicycling protocol is to call out "I am coming up behind you on the left" on the walking/biking paths. Being startled can result in a fall or stepping into a bad collision.
- Not hearing a pot boiling over on the stove.
- Not hearing someone say "be careful that is hot"
- Not hearing "there is ice on the steps, watch out"
- Not hearing the smoke alarm or carbon monoxide detector.
- Not hearing the crack of a broken water pipe on a below freezing day.
- Not hearing something (or someone) falling in another part of the house.
- Not hearing a family member or neighbor calling for help.
- Not hearing a car whizzing up behind or beside you.
- Not hearing a car alarm.
- Not hearing your neighbor pounding on your door to warn you the house is on fire.
- Not hearing the weather alert sirens. Not hearing sirens at all especially when in the car.
- Not being able to understand what the police officer who pulled you over is saying so it looks like you are not cooperating.

- Not hearing the turn signal for MILES, confusing other drivers and risking an accident.
- Not hearing when an appliance, or your car engine is malfunctioning.
- Not hearing someone approach you from behind.
- Not hearing the approaching train whistle at a crossing with no signal.
- Not hearing a tree branch cracking overhead.
- Not hearing weather alert sirens.
- Not hearing the warning growl of a dog, or rattlesnake, or bees nest
- Mishearing what your doctor is trying to tell you about your health.
- Mishearing your spouse, child, parent or loved one which causes hard feelings and alienation.
- Mishearing your boss's instructions and potentially losing your job.
- Not hearing trouble brewing at home, in the workplace, at school, in the mall and ending up left out or worse, in danger.

Put simply, hearing loss can cost lives.

For people who are Hard of Hearing, access to affordable hearing aids is the key to being able to function in our lives. We want the chance to fully participate, connect and to feel safe in our homes, work places and communities. The treatment and technology for hearing loss is here. Now what we need is the will to ensure that the cost is within reach for those who need them.

A while back, someone with normal hearing asked me what the experience of hearing loss was like. I wrote this poem to explain:

What is Hearing Loss?

What is Hearing Loss?

It is living Life so Near, yet so Far.

It is holding a Loved one close, hearing the cadence of their voice

Yet not knowing the words they are saying.

It is watching the happy chatter of a child,

Yet having no idea what they are telling you.

It is watching a roomful of friends erupting in laughter,

Yet not knowing the joke OR the punch line.

Feeling Alone in a crowd.

It is longing, but not being able to connect.

Watching Life as if encased alone in a soundproof glass tube.

So Near, yet so Far.

Those who hold the technology, the answer

Dangle the key and demand a King's ransom.

Richly feeding on our desperation and hope.

The price of connection, extracted

In the name of profligate profit.

What price a human soul reconnected?

So Near, yet so Far.

Thank you for listening to me.

I want to thank the Chair and the Committee for your time and your consideration.

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