

Speaking up

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When hearing loss affects a person's ability to communicate, it is classified as a disability. It is unfortunate that many people with hearing loss still do not fess up to a hearing loss, let alone consider it a disability or take advantage of their protection status under the law. The end result hurts everyone who has a hearing loss and simply perpetuates the stigma and isolation associated with it.

Nobody can tell by looking at us how much difficulty we have with comprehension, and so it is easy to dismiss it. "You're hard of hearing? Well, I'll just speak louder." Or "You can sit in the front row so you can hear." It doesn't work that way. We will always do better with captioning or assistive listening devices (and sign language for some people), and there are laws that say we're entitled to them. The problem is the majority of people with hearing loss still are reluctant to request accommodations or to do anything that will draw attention to themselves. Thus, it is often difficult to advise a facility that it must provide accommodations and is breaking the law if it doesn't, because nobody has ever expressed a need: What I'm getting at is this: If we don't speak up when we go to a movie theater that does not provide an assistive listening system, is it likely anyone else will speak up? If we don't speak up when we need captioning to understand an employment-related meeting, is it likely anyone else will speak up? Take it one step further: we are spending thousands of dollars on hearing-related expenses; yet our health insurance policies, on which we undoubtedly pay high premiums, do not cover hearing aids. Isn't there something wrong with this, and don't we have an obligation to speak up about this inequity? If we-people who wear hearing aids-do not speak up, is it likely anyone else will?

Our organization is the voice for people with hearing loss. We are made up of volunteers who want to raise awareness about this disability and all its repercussions- which go far beyond where to shop for hearing aids. The challenge of an all-volunteer organization is getting volunteers. If you've "been there, done that, "think again. Have you really? If you don't think you have anything to offer because you're still in the I-need-to-help-myself-first stage, you should know that the only way to help yourself is to help someone else. There's lots of work to do for the betterment of those who come after us. If we don't speak up, is it likely anyone else will?