

Hearing Loop Makes all the Stage a World (that can be heard)



Thanks to two anonymous donors, The Theatre of Western Springs (TWS) is pleased to announce a big step forward in improving the theatergoing experience for its audience members with hearing challenges. Over the summer, TWS installed new technology called a hearing loop.

People with hearing aids can hear the actors' words with incredible clarity - without headphones. Sounds are transmitted directly to wireless receivers within hearing aids.

The technology is commonplace in Europe, but only recently is America aware of the possibilities. Eventually, many public venues will install it.

"Three months ago I was really struggling with the decision of another subscription to TWS," said Henry Karplus, longtime TWS subscriber and Active member. "My deteriorating hearing has robbed me of the pleasure to enjoy the shows. Neither \$5,000 hearing aids nor the hearing assist devices supplied by the theatre helped enough to allow me to relax and enjoy. Instead I missed punch lines and other important parts of dialogue. With the loop system, vocal clarity has been restored, and I really am enjoying the shows. Am I glad I took the chance and subscribed once again!"

TWS's hearing loop is installed under the seats in the auditorium. It's a thin strand of copper wire radiating electromagnetic signals that are picked up by a tiny receiver called a telecoil or "T-coil," which is already built into most hearing aids.

"It's a lot like Wi-Fi for people with hearing aids," said Bill Hammack, managing director at TWS. "The sounds from the stage are picked up by microphones, amplified, and fed into the loop wire, where they are transmitted to a person's hearing aid. As an added bonus, the sounds are equalized to the individual's specific hearing needs, so the quality is much better than with a simple amplified device."

It is estimated that about 80 percent of all hearing aids are equipped with T-coils that can be switched on by the user. Occasionally, a trip to the audiologist is necessary to activate or tune the device, but it's well worth it.

Loop systems offer an easy and invisible solution to an invisible problem, thus are much more likely to be used. They can serve the hard of hearing at court proceedings, ticket counters, teller windows, drive-through stations, airport gate areas, and train and subway stations--venues where other assistive listening systems are impractical.

"We feel that for our theatre, the loop will pay for itself with increased attendance," Hammack said. "Besides, we owe it to our patrons to accommodate their needs."

The Theatre of Western Springs is located at 4384 Hampton Ave. Now in its 83rd season, it is the oldest continually-producing theatre in the greater Chicago area.