

Prepared Remarks from Peter Fackler of the NY State Association of Hearing Loss Association of America for Public Hearing, October 20, 2021, 10:00 a.m

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the challenges that hard of hearing people face in the workplace. My written submission includes an addendum of research and data resource citations that more fully address hearing loss and employment. Bottom line: people with hearing loss earn less and have higher rates of unemployment.

By way of introduction: I am a long-time member of Hearing Loss Association of America, its New York State Association, and of the Rochester chapter where I serve on the boards of directors. I have experienced first-hand the frustration of being hard of hearing in the workplace and I know the pain and shock of becoming unemployed as my hearing deteriorated. Most of my career was spent in higher education as a financial manager. I learned that I had a hearing loss when I was 42 and promptly was fitted with two hearing aids. By the time I was 57, I could not hear on the telephone nor effectively participate in face-to-face meetings. My career was over. Through the marvels of two cochlear implants and other assistive technologies and newfound support at Hearing Loss Association, I later found temporary opportunities in the workplace. While I am fortunate in many ways, I also bring a background of experience in what it is like to be a hard of hearing person in the workplace.

48 million people live with hearing loss in the USA. Approximately 2% are deaf and rely on sign language to communicate. The other 98% are hard of hearing and rely on spoken words to communicate. This is the hard of hearing population that I will speak of today.

Hearing loss is often described as an 'invisible disability' because there is no visual tip-off to others that someone does not hear so well. Thus, employers will not know from observation that a job applicant or employee is hard of hearing and may need accommodations.

A person's hearing can improve with the use of hearing aids or cochlear implants, but these devices do not fully correct a person's hearing. For most people with hearing loss, even those with hearing aids and cochlear implants, the hearing capability they will bring to bear in the workplace will be less than optimal.

Each person's hearing loss is unique, and no two persons' situations are exactly the same. Similarly, we know that workplace environments are not homogeneous. Therefore, experience teaches us that one-size-fits-all strategies will not adequately address the situations that may pertain.

So, we are dealing with a complex set of circumstances when we think about how to improve working outcomes for hard of hearing people. Where hard of hearing people succeed in employment, we usually find a combination of management -driven positive workplace cultures and elements of assertiveness and self-knowledge on the part of the employee. A positive workplace culture determined by top management and reinforced by supportive colleagues of the hard of hearing employee is key.

Now, let's consider how we might work together to address the combined needs of employers and employees to achieve greater productivity and success in the workplace for hard of hearing people? Perhaps, via a public-private partnership wherein New York State would foster and encourage a working group of employers and hard of hearing advocates to develop a tool kit of resources and training materials that would address the needs of employers and hard of hearing employees in striving to make workplace environments hard of hearing friendly. The tool kit of best practices would focus on technology resources (an ever changing and improving set of alternatives), employer strategies and practices for becoming a hard of hearing friendly employer, and employee strategies for being knowledgeable about their hearing loss and assertive in advocating for oneself. In addition, the work might well include recommendations to the appropriate legislative and regulatory bodies for removing barriers to workplace success for hard of hearing people that are a function of existing law and regulation or of workplace practices that are unintended outcomes of law and regulation. When a critical mass of resources has been developed, state government could be invaluable in encouraging employers and hard of hearing employees and job applicants to adopt these best practices. We would envision the work to be ongoing as new technologies emerge and as we learn more from employers and hard of hearing employees about what works (and doesn't) in fostering greater workplace success for hard of hearing employees.

I will mention in closing that New York State is one of only 12 states that lack a state agency or commission for the deaf and hard of hearing. Members of Hearing Loss Association and advocates for the Deaf are currently working to assist state legislators to adopt a bill to establish such an agency and to thereby create an institutional nexus for addressing opportunities for improving workplace access for people with hearing loss.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to meet with you and will gladly entertain any questions or comments you may have.