

# Hearing Loops for Veterans: My Experience

BY JIM RAU

This is an account of my experience requesting a hearing loop for the check-in counter at my local Twin Ports Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) Clinic in Superior, Wisconsin. It describes the VA's responses, miscommunications, misunderstandings and bureaucratic detours and dead ends. Chronologically, it spans from 2018 to June 2021. The whole process was sure a learning experience for me, and I hope you can learn something from it, too.

A hearing loop is a device which transmits sound directly to a person's hearing aids or cochlear implants. There are variations of hearing loops ranging from small (for check-in counters) to large (concert halls and airports). I thought my request was reasonable for a VA clinic that serves a very high proportion of patients with hearing loss.

My first request written to the clinic manager at Twin Ports in 2018 was denied for the stated reason that, "it would be a violation of HIPAA regulations." Knowing that reason was not valid, I supplied the VA with documentation on various devices and renewed my request. That request was denied as well. But the interesting part is that the denial was not delivered to me, but rather written into my medical record. I only found out about it by asking my triage nurse during a visit for an annual physical nearly a year later. I felt a bit offended by how they responded.

After consulting with audiologists Juliëtte Sterkens and Brad Ingrao, I contacted my local senators and the Minnesota senators (since my VA clinic is managed by the Minneapolis VA Medical Center) as well as congresspeople from both states asking for their help. The most notable result was that Senator Tammy Baldwin wrote a letter to the VA on my behalf. That generated a letter of response from the Minneapolis Medical Center Director Patrick Kelly acknowledging my request and promising to look into it. Director Kelly's letter also said that the supervisor of audiology at Minneapolis would be the

lead. Of course, that is same the person who denied my original requests. Back to square one I wrote a letter to the supervisor of audiology explaining my request in detail because of all the confusion earlier—no response.

During the COVID-19 year, the VA scheduled a town hall meeting with patients to discuss issues at their outreach clinics and I thought this would be a good opportunity to voice my request at that virtual meeting. The Google Meet was started, but no one from the VA logged on, only veterans asking each other what happened here. Months later another town hall meeting was scheduled. I was able to connect (virtually) and was able to ask Director Kelly (the person who responded to Senator Baldwin's letter) directly about installing hearing loops in VA facilities. He had no recollection of the issue and referred my question to some other staff online to answer and no one could answer the question. They promised to get back to me but never did.

My "end run" started in 2020. The top-down approach wasn't working so I tried the bottom-up route. My staff audiologist at the Twin Ports Clinic was a big supporter of hearing loops and he wrote a letter of support on my behalf. Shortly thereafter, he took a position at the Minneapolis VA Center. My new audiologist at the Twin Ports Clinic happened to be a supporter of hearing loops, too. I offered to loan my personal PLA 90 (countertop loop driver) to the VA until they could sort through their plan of action. That offer was refused initially because they thought I wanted recognition as the lender and later dismissed for some unknown-to-me reason.

Finally, I got a phone call from the supervisor of audiology in Minneapolis who was quite understanding and polite. He told me that he was having his staff audiologist at Twin Ports look into hearing loops for the facility. Then in July 2021 I received a message from the VA stating "... The VA will provide a PLA 90 at our front desk for your use to accommodate your needs. It will be kept there for the time it is needed by you. ..."

I thought that was a pretty defensive statement to cover themselves. The thought of claiming a violation of ADA crossed my mind but I never did that. I also thought, how can they think I'm the only patient with hearing loss.

A month later I got a second call from him saying that they had ordered a countertop hearing loop for the check-in desk. Wow. I was happy—and it took only three years. I'll be happier when I see it in place with the blue placards denoting a loop is available. And happiest if they ever get a looped facility.

So, what did I learn? The VA medical providers are very caring and competent professionals. The VA

administration is well protected by layers of firewalls and not approachable by users like me. But the VA is responsive to high level political intervention. I thought my top-down and bottom-up approach was a good idea, but I underestimated how high the top was in the top-down approach. I thought the clinic manager could make such a decision, but that was clearly wrong.

I want to leave this final thought for all veterans and their families and caregivers. Ask the VA to provide you with accommodations for your hearing loss. Send a letter addressed to your provider, the manager, the VA Medical Center, and most importantly, your senator. They will surely read your request a little closer when

they see the list of addressees. By doing so, you'll not only help yourself but a host of other veterans, too. And check out the HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter at [hearingloss.org/hearing-help/communities/veterans/](http://hearingloss.org/hearing-help/communities/veterans/). **HL**

*Jim is currently president of the HLAA Wisconsin State Association and is an advocate for hearing loops. He is an original member of the Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter and has a service-connected hearing loss.*



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