Carla “Brandi” Smiley, Au.D., CCC-A, was diagnosed with bilateral hearing loss at age six by an educational audiologist, inspiring her future profession. After the clinic where she was employed shut down in early 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, she pursued her dream of starting a mobile audiology unit to serve patients with hearing loss in underserved communities in Atlanta.

Her creative solution? An 8x20-foot, ADA-accessible, tiny house hearing clinic on wheels, fully equipped with state-of-the-art audiological equipment, such as a 6x6-foot, low-profile, soundproof examination booth and visual reinforcement audiometry equipment with digital screens. The 15,000-pound unit can be hauled by a heavy-duty truck using a bumper pull format to mobilize to neighborhoods where she provides comprehensive hearing care, primarily to school-aged children, seniors and veterans.

“Key issues that disproportionately affect access to equitable health care by minorities include socioeconomic status, geographical limitations, societal/cultural stigma and educational disparities, which often lead to diagnostic delays and medical mistrust,” says Dr. Smiley. “Breaking down these barriers starts by increasing awareness and education about hearing loss and other issues that affect diverse populations and bringing patient-centered services directly to these communities. My unique tiny house clinic is a novel solution that appeals to both children and adults, which makes hearing care services more approachable.”

Onsite Audiology mobile clinic launched in 2021 after a successful crowdfunding campaign that raised investments of more than $85,000 to build the clinic from family, friends and others who believed in her mission. Dr. Smiley had witnessed the impact of mobilized services during a series of humanitarian trips to countries like Serbia, Honduras, Romania and India, and wanted to introduce that same effectiveness to her home state of Georgia. She currently focuses on schools, educational agencies, early intervention centers, assisted and independent living facilities and skilled nursing facilities in 20 different counties, often in rural or semi-rural settings.

Dr. Smiley shares, “By providing access through the mobile hearing clinic on wheels, we were able to assess more than 1,000 Head Start students between the ages of three and five, as well as 1,400 students receiving online instruction in grades K-12, allowing us to identify a significant number of hearing loss cases that would have gone another year overlooked. Our mobile services also help overcome concerns that may prevent parents from seeking hearing health care. For instance, a three-year-old came in complaining of something in his ear. I noticed a blue type of object in the ear, so I used my video otoscope to take a deeper look. This kid had stuffed a wad of Play-Doh in his ear! Access to our mobile hearing clinic with state-of-the-art equipment allowed me to remove the Play-Doh from this child’s ear on site. This is just one of many examples of how Onsite Audiology supports better hearing for residents of underserved communities in the greater Atlanta region.”