

Push to Legalize Over-the-Counter Hearing Aids Misses the Mark

Over-the-counter hearing aids do not help the public as promised. The far better answer is health insurance coverage for real hearing health care.

Over-the-counter sales of hearing aids are getting a big push in Congress. Currently hearing aids are only available from licensed providers. Proponents say over-the-counter sales will lower consumer hearing aid costs. But opponents say over-the-counter hearing aids will end FDA consumer protections. This places consumers at risk because they lose the guidance and safety of licensed providers. Moreover, lower costs have not increased hearing aid use in the past. Even people that get free hearing aids do not automatically use them. There is a smarter way to lower consumer costs and help more people hear better. Make health insurance cover real hearing health care.



Veterans pose outside [Cape Ann Veterans Services](#) in Gloucester, MA with [Beauport Hearing Care](#) provider Judi Bergeron, BC-HIS. Hearing Partnership provided free services to veterans. Hearing coaching and local hearing aid services were more important to hearing aid adoption and treatment success than the cost of free VA-issued hearing aids.

Only about 15% of Americans that need hearing aids actually use them. And studies show untreated hearing loss is driving up health care costs. Untreated hearing loss is associated with early onset dementia. Hearing loss is also associated with increased hospitalizations from falls. Effective treatment lowers health care costs.

Most people feel health insurance should cover hearing health care. And why not since treating hearing loss lowers costs? But special interests are pushing over-the-counter hearing aids instead. There are public costs for this. Consumers lose the guidance of licensed hearing care providers. And they lose the protection of FDA rules that licensed providers must follow. For example, FDA rules require licensed providers assess need for medical attention. Moreover, many people need coaching to succeed with hearing aids. Health insurance coverage of quality hearing health care

would lower consumer costs. Finally, insurance coverage of hearing coaching (i.e., aural rehabilitation) and tinnitus care would go a long way towards increasing hearing aid use.

Coaching Is More Important Than 'Free'

Special interests claim cost is the reason more people do not use hearing aids. They say hearing aids just cost too much. Consumers can save money by testing themselves and picking their own devices. But the evidence tells a very different story. Even free hearing aids do not automatically result in more people using them.

Hearing aid use in countries where they are free is similar to their use in the United States. And American veterans also get free hearing aids. But veterans are no more likely to use hearing aids than other Americans that must pay for their hearing aids. In addition, we see plenty of veterans in our [Beauport Hearing Care](#) practice with hearing aids that are not working. But we get them working.

A Better Solution

Hearing Partnership conducted an informal experiment. We wanted to demonstrate a better solution.



Fit to Serve became law in December 2016. This law aims to help veterans get easier access to hearing health care. Implementation of this law offers a perfect opportunity to model a better way to reform the hearing health care system.

Our [Beauport Hearing Care](#) practice provided services to veterans at no cost. First of all, our idea was not to replace Veterans Administration (VA) audiology services. Rather, we wanted to help veterans be successful. Many veterans we helped were not wearing their free VA-issued hearing aids. Furthermore, others had never tried hearing aids before. Some veterans we served had mild to moderate hearing loss and others had more severe losses. So we wanted to see if coaching and local hearing aid

services increased success. It did! Most veterans needed coaching. Some needed hearing aids fitted or adjusted. All needed hearing aid cleaning.

The veterans that did not wear hearing aids before are now using their new VA-issued hearing aids. Moreover, some of these veterans did not even know they were eligible for free hearing aids. We guided them to the VA. Most of all, every veteran said our extra help made the difference they needed.

In conclusion, coaching provided with local hearing aid services are more important factors than cost alone! There are many studies that confirm this conclusion. It takes a community to fit a hearing aid.

Mild or Moderate Cases Often Need More Help

Hearing problems often involve neurological issues. As a result amplification alone does not address it. But aural rehabilitation and other treatments do. Every hearing loss case is unique. Sometimes moderate cases need more help than severe cases. Occasionally medical referrals are recommended. Moreover, some patients with moderate higher frequency hearing loss need amplification with less distortion in higher frequencies. Therefore, cheaper devices aren't enough. Consumers with any hearing loss deserve real help. People need the guidance of licensed providers.

The Better Answer: Health Insurance Coverage for Real Hearing Health Care

We call on advocates to promote health insurance coverage of hearing health care. That is the best way to lower consumer costs and lower health care costs. Most of all, people need quality hearing aids. And they need the help licensed professionals alone can provide.

Some advocates say they receive calls daily from consumers that can't afford hearing aids. But such calls are evidence of the need for health insurance coverage of real hearing health care. They are not evidence that people want over-the-counter hearing aids. People want help!

Call to Action

Tell Congress: We Want Health Insurance Coverage – Not the false promise of Over-the-Counter Hearing Aids!

<http://hearingpartnership.org/news>

Oppose S.670/ H.R.1652, titled, "*the Over-the-Counter Hearing Aid Act of 2017*". Make health insurance cover hearing aids *and* quality hearing health care.

[Want to take action? Click here for the International Hearing Society online action alert.](#)Opens in a new window

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