Myers's advocacy for hearing loops in the United States began in his hometown of Holland in western Michigan. He brought together religious leaders, audiologists, school and civic officials and business leaders to hear about the devices. His pitch combined information, altruism and self-interest. He argued that people with hearing loss would enjoy a better quality of life if the loops were widely installed, and that businesses could make their customers happier. “The argument is, wouldn't you like more customers from among America’s population with hearing loss?” he says.

That campaign successfully looped 80 places of worship, 18 businesses, auditoriums at local schools and colleges and the senior center, community center and City Hall council chambers, then spread to Grand Rapids, where the city’s convention center, airport and many houses of worship are now looped. Myers also launched www.hearingloop.org, to publicize the benefits of hearing loops. He traveled around the country to speak to civic and hearing advocacy groups. He also lobbied hearing aid manufacturers to include a magnetic telecoil receptor in all new models of hearing aids to make the devices compatible with loop systems.

Myers’s advocacy gained further momentum last year, when the Hearing Loss Association of America joined with the American Academy of Audiology to launch a national educational campaign called “Get in the Hearing Loop.”

From that moment on, Myers, a psychology professor at Hope College in Holland, Mich., began advocating for hearing loops in the United States so that more of the 36 million adults in the United States experiencing some degree of hearing loss can better hear any type of amplified presentation in a large space, from the prayers at a worship service to the dialogue at a movie.
Why hasn’t the technology been embraced in the United States? While the Americans with Disabilities Act requires public facilities to have assistive listening systems for people with hearing loss, most places comply by relying on FM or infrared systems, which are easier to install.

FM or infrared signals to headphones — are inconvenient and ineffective. In a movie theater, for example, people who struggle to hear need to get headsets from employees, check them out and return to their seats. By contrast, a hearing loop system transmits directly to hearing aids and requires only the push of a button for people to tune in.

“Put yourself in the position of a person with hearing loss,” Myers says. “Which of these two systems are you more likely to use?”

Hearing loops transmit magnetic energy to hearing aids through a wire that surrounds an audience. The loops work in small areas — such as the back seats of all London taxis — as well as very large areas, such as the 12,200 fixed seats in Michigan State University’s basketball arena. “That’s part of the beauty of the technology,” says Myers. Typical costs for installing them range from $2,000 to $8,000 for small to medium-sized worship centers, but more for very large facilities with lots of embedded steel.

Myers emphasizes that hearing loops are more effective because they deliver sound customized by one’s hearing aids for one’s particular hearing needs. In the United Kingdom, the law mandates public facilities to be equipped with hearing assistive technology, and many sites have opted for hearing loops. The devices are also used throughout Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland.

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Making public spaces more accessible for people with hearing aids reduces the social isolation so many of them feel when they go to public events but can’t understand what’s being said, says Michael Harvey, PhD, a psychologist who specializes in the treatment of people who grew up without hearing and who lost their hearing late in life. “It takes a lot of work, but it is possible to convince, fund and make hearing loops become national,” he says. “Psychologically, it’s hugely, hugely important,” he says.

Growing need

Myers started losing his hearing as a teen, due to a genetic condition that gradually eroded his ability to hear low-frequency sounds. He started using a hearing aid in his early 40s, and within a few years, couldn’t function professionally without one.

Despite the slow loss of his hearing, Myers earned a