

[https://www.recorder.com/Northfield-pursues-\\$500K-in-audio-upgrades-to-help-residents-with-hearing-loss-50017086](https://www.recorder.com/Northfield-pursues-$500K-in-audio-upgrades-to-help-residents-with-hearing-loss-50017086)

Northfield pursues \$50K in audio upgrades to help residents with hearing loss

By CHRIS LARABEE

Staff Writer

Published: 2/22/2023 5:37:48 PM

NORTHFIELD — The town is at the “forefront” of municipal accessibility as it prepares to install audio equipment in several rooms.

Using a \$50,000 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) appropriation, the town intends to equip the Selectboard meeting room, the Northfield Senior Center and a conference room at Dickinson Memorial Library with audio accessibility equipment.

To introduce the project, titled “Hear Here Northfield,” the Senior Center hosted Dr. Julie Fisher, an audiologist with Baystate Rehabilitation Care in Greenfield, on Wednesday to talk about hearing loss and share how the new equipment will work.

“The Town of Northfield is doing some pretty exciting things,” Fisher said. “It’s neat to see a small town at the forefront of technology like this.”

These adapted rooms will be open to the public and the technology will allow attendees who are hard of hearing to listen to municipal meetings, attend Zoom events and hear other activities without difficulty.

Selectboard Chair and ARPA Committee member Barbara “Bee” Jacque said the town-wide effort came after Northfield was unable to secure an Americans with Disabilities Act grant for the equipment, so the town opted to use ARPA money instead.

“It was a no-brainer really,” Jacque said, adding that a lot of resident feedback, especially at events like Town Meeting, consists of people expressing it is difficult to hear. “For me, it’s always been on my mind. ... You can literally see people cupping their ear.

“I want [meetings] to be accessible,” Jacque continued. “Whatever we can do to improve the delivery of services and communication, I’m all for it.”

Senior Center Director Colleen Letourneau noted the hearing accessibility technology is the town's first project under AARP's age- and dementia-friendly initiative.

"This is our kickoff," she said. "We're very excited to have this in Northfield."

Audio loops and FM technology

In the Senior Center, the town will install a hearing loop, also known as an audio induction loop, to provide high-quality audio. The technology works by feeding audio captured in a microphone through an amplifier, which generates a magnetic field that is then captured by telecoils that are built into hearing aids and implants. The hearing aid then converts the signal into sound customized for the listener's individual pattern of hearing loss, according to the Hearing Loss Association of America, a nonprofit dedicated to advocating for hearing accessibility.

With an uptick in the use of the Senior Center, Selectboard member Alex Meisner said it only makes sense to encourage even more people to come by, thanks to this technology.

Fisher emphasized people will need to speak with their personal audiologist to ensure their hearing aids are able to pick up the signal.

"If you have a hearing aid that has a telecoil in it," she said, "you can use your own personal program to access the sound."

In the Selectboard room and Dickinson Memorial Library's conference room, Letourneau explained the technology will use FM signals connecting to speakers and headphones, which is already used in school environments for children with hearing loss.

"These systems are going to be user-friendly for each participant," Letourneau said. "You won't have to read lips or captions; you will be present and can engage."

Town Administrator Andrea Llamas said the equipment is already ordered and will be installed when ready.

Hearing loss information

During her presentation, Fisher said hearing loss is a common ailment in the United States — 48 million Americans have some degree of it — and it is extremely

important for everyone, whether young or old, to talk to their primary care provider if they experience any form of it.

There are numerous factors that can contribute to hearing loss, including genetics, exposure to loud noises, medication, disease or trauma.

“Hearing loss is invisible and it comes so slowly for people that we often compensate before we know we have a hearing problem,” Fisher said, noting hearing loss is often correlated with other significant diseases, such as dementia or diabetes. “These are all important reasons to link your primary doctor in, whether it’s related to hearing or vision.”

Even with hearing loss being so prevalent in the U.S., Fisher said only about one in five people who could benefit from hearing aids actually choose to get them. Key reasons people hesitate to get hearing aids include people having a difficult time admitting they are losing their hearing due to negative associations with aging, people not even noticing the loss is happening due to the onset being so slow, or the cost of the technology being too high.

Costs, however, may soon be changing. Fisher said each hearing aid can range in price from \$699 to \$2,700, but in the past few years insurance companies have been offering more coverage. Some insurance plans can even knock down the price “as low as \$300 for a set,” she said.

“[Cost] is one of the biggest barriers,” Fisher said, noting that Massachusetts’ state insurance does cover a significant portion of the cost. “I see a lot of people every day that don’t know they have hearing aid coverage.”

Getting hearing aids or assistance with hearing is important for continued health, she said, because proactive protection can help ensure your hearing lasts far longer.

“If you broke your arm and kept it in a sling and didn’t do physical therapy, and you took it out to pitch a game, it probably wouldn’t be your best game,” Fisher said, providing an analogy. “People who treat their hearing loss earlier have a better prognosis for long-term communication.”

Chris Larabee can be reached at clarabee@recorder.com or 413-930-4081.