

Hi Pam,

Thank you for your summary of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women study of the needs of senior women. All of these needs are very important to the health and well-being of senior women.

As you know one of my passions is accessibility related to hearing loss for all with hearing loss. At this time I am focusing in particular for senior women with hearing loss.

Hearing loss occurs in one out of ten in the general population and at a much higher percentage in seniors. Accessibility needs for this population is, I find, rarely addressed or even acknowledged. Accessibility to most people means wheelchair ramps and access along with visual aids for blind or low vision. Accessibility for those with hearing loss does virtually not exist here in Halton.

Hearing aids and cochlear implants are wonderful devices, but they do not provide full access to sound or information that people assume they do. They are life savers yes, but they need a boost in many situations, assistive devices provide this boost. Where are assistive devices available? Not in many places here in Halton I must say. I am so frustrated by this and this situation has to change. If accessibility is to include those with hearing loss, accessibility must be provided.

When I think of what is missed by myself and others with hearing loss, I think about all the educational opportunities to learn from speakers, entertainers, and performances. Learning from and keeping up on current affairs, health concerns and advancements, safety issues, housing options and the list is endless. These are not accessible to those of us with hearing loss. Being an active contributing member of our society is not an option if a person does not hear or understand the issues.

I am finding it more and more isolating and frustrating to become involved and active in my community. I have a desire to be aware of issues and become part of solutions, but I do not have access to places where information is shared, debated, and solutions found. Even small meetings are challenging, acoustics, fans, lighting, internal and external noise all contribute to hearing difficulties for those of us with hearing loss. I find even small meetings difficult and most often impossible to follow and understand. Hearing people in general from my experience when at a meeting all speak at the same time. For a person like myself with a hearing loss, even though I have cochlear implants, it is impossible to follow the conversation when people are speaking over each other, it seems hearing people can do this, well those of us with hearing loss cannot and are therefore, not able to be a contributor or participant in the group. I leave many of these situations feeling left out and isolated, and useless. My self esteem and sense of worth, and mental health suffer. I eventually have to give up the effort and stop going as it is just too damaging to my sense of self. I know it does not seem like a good solution, but sometimes self preservation is the best thing to do at the time.

Meeting halls, conference halls, theatres, libraries, nursing homes, etc need to be made accessible for those with hearing loss. They need to also be equipped with the proper receivers to accommodate various types of loss. Several places I have contacted over the past few months advertise they are accessible, but after I investigate, they are not as they have outdated equipment that does not provide the necessary loop receiver that implant users require.

Those with hearing loss need to be educated as to how access to events, lectures, education, entertainment can happen for them. Most do not know. I am fortunate that I do as I worked in the field of deaf education. Audiologists and hearing aid clinics need to also provide information about assistive

devices both personal and in the outside world. They need to teach advocacy to the user and empower them to ask for accessibility in their community. However, for the hearing aid and cochlear implant users to know what is possible is of no use if, in fact, facilities are not made accessible. How do we make this happen? The Ontario Disability Act seems to me to have had no impact on having a system where venues and facilities, educational facilities and theatres become accessible for those with hearing loss.

I have known about systems such as the Sennheiser infrared system for some time and know that venues such as Mirvish Theatres in Toronto are equipped with them. I have often asked venues here in Halton if they have such a system and the answer has always been no. I have missed International Women's Day Luncheons for years because they are not accessible. This is one example only. I recently was involved in a fundraiser at QEP in Oakville and decided to contact someone I knew about the Loop system that she had used in Toronto. After some research I was able to contact the person from Better Hearing Solutions and he installed a temporary loop for our event. I invited several people I know with implants and hearing aids and we all sat in the Looped section. The sound was amazing. None of us could believe the clarity of the sound. We sat and listened effortlessly, a first, to the speaker. It was such an eye opener for me and I realized that I want to somehow begin to advocate for this wonderful system to be installed in our area. Just to experience that I and the others could actually be included and part of this and many other events was so empowering.

I must say I have not been met with anyone who has shown interest in actually install the Loop unfortunately, but I will continue my advocacy work and hope that one day I, too, can enjoy and participate in what happens in my community.

Seniors centres and libraries should all be equipped with Loop systems so that the seniors attending can understand and be part of everything that is happening. These centres provide information at affordable rates and should be fully accessible to those with hearing loss.

Senior women on fixed income are already isolated and hearing loss magnifies that isolation.

It is way past time that Halton becomes accessible for hearing aid and cochlear implant users.

I would be happy to discuss these issues further with you at any time.  
Thanks and take care

Cathy Cuthbertson