

Harkin, Snowe Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Help Financially Strained Americans Afford Hearing Aids

Written by Sen. Tom Harkin
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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Senators Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Olympia Snowe (R-ME) today introduced legislation to help individuals with hearing loss purchase hearing aids. The bipartisan *Hearing Aid Assistance Tax Credit Act* seeks to provide a \$500 credit for the purchase of hearing aids for both adults and children. Hearing loss is a serious problem for millions of Americans, as are the financial costs of hearing aids. 68 percent of those with hearing loss cite financial constraints as a core reason for not seeking treatment and only about 25 percent of people with hearing loss actually use a hearing aid, even though 95 percent of people with hearing loss can be successfully treated with hearing aids. The \$500 credit allowed under the bill would apply for each hearing aid, and it would be available every five years. Co-sponsors of the bill include Senators Herb Kohl (D-WI), Thad Cochran (R-MS), Tim Johnson (D-SD), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY).

“Growing up with a brother who was deaf, I saw firsthand the challenges that individuals with hearing loss faces every day. For many, the solution is as simple as getting a hearing aid, but sadly, many Americans are not able to afford this life-changing device,” **said Senator Harkin**. “We must do more to help people who cannot afford hearing aids to live happier, more productive lives. This bill makes long-term economic sense and improves the lives of our friends, family members, and neighbors with hearing loss.”

“Hearing aids make a world of difference for the millions of Americans who suffer from hearing loss, yet limited health care coverage of these vital devices leave many patients unable to benefit from this essential medical care,” **said Senator Snowe**. “For patients who rely on these devices to better interact with their families and their communities, access to these devices can significantly improve their quality of life and productivity.”

Currently, hearing aids are excluded from Medicare coverage, and 61 percent of all hearing aid purchases involve no third party payment. The average cost for a hearing aid in 2008 was \$1,675 per ear, including fitting, evaluation, and post-fitting treatment. 80 percent of people require two devices. The lack of action to provide hearing aids to Americans who need them has consequences including:

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- Children who do not receive early intervention cost schools an additional \$420,000 and are faced with overall lifetime costs of \$1 million in special education, lost wages, and health complications. Children can be fitted with hearing aids soon after birth.
- A 2005 survey of 80,000 households by the Better Hearing Institute indicated that untreated hearing loss results in an average loss of income per household of up to \$12,000/year.
- For seniors, a 1999 National Council on the Aging (NCOA) study demonstrated that untreated hearing loss often results in distorted communication, isolation, withdrawal, depression, anger and severely reduced overall psychological health.