

Assistive Listening in Houses of Worship

This guide provides a list of considerations for the first-time implementation of an assistive listening system in a house of worship. Each item in the list includes practical tasks to guide you through choosing, setting up, and maintaining an assistive listening system. These tasks should be completed by a group within the house of worship made up of staff, congregants with hearing loss, and other congregants/volunteers. This group should take responsibility for the project and work through the items listed below. Some items and tasks need to be carried out at the same time. Taking these considerations into account will help ensure that the chosen system meets the congregation's needs, remains effective and accessible, and supports long-term sustainability.

Assess Congregational Activities and Needs

- **Identify key activities:** List the activities (e.g., worship services, meetings, social gatherings, educational programs, etc.) in which an assistive listening system may be needed. Include when and where these activities take place.
- **Gather input from stakeholders:** Hold group discussions or conduct surveys with congregants, staff, and volunteers to determine specific hearing challenges and system needs (e.g., privacy, portability, support for musical programming, etc.)
- **Prioritize activities:** Prioritize which activities are most important for the system to support (e.g., worship services may be the highest priority, followed by educational programs).

Note the Characteristics of the Space(s) Used for the Various Activities

- **Look at the design of the space(s):** Make notes on the layout and size of the worship space, meeting rooms, or fellowship halls where an assistive listening system is being considered.
- **Notice the sound quality of the space(s):** When listening to the sound in each space, notice whether the sound is muffled or clear and if there is an echo or background noise present.
- **Consider other factors:** Lighting, seating arrangements, and physical obstacles, such as pillars, are other important factors to note in each space.

Consider Compatibility with Existing Audio Equipment

- **Examine current systems:** Review the current audio and sound equipment, including microphones, speakers, and mixers.

- **Confirm compatibility:** Be sure the new assistive listening system is compatible with existing equipment or identify what additional hardware or upgrades might be required.
- **Check growth potential:** Consider whether the new system will work with any future upgrades or changes to the audio/visual setup that are planned.

Understand Different Types of Assistive Listening Systems

- **Research available systems:** Learn about the different types of assistive listening systems available, such as:
 - **FM Systems:** Use radio frequencies to transmit sound to a receiver with an accessory for listening.
 - **Infrared (IR) Systems:** Use infrared light to transmit sound to a receiver with an accessory for listening.
 - **Hearing Loops:** Use electromagnetic fields to transmit sound directly to hearing aids or to a receiver with an accessory for listening. Not all hearing aids are capable of connecting directly to hearing loops.
 - **Wi-Fi:** Uses existing Wi-Fi networks to stream audio to a personal smartphone or a receiver with an accessory for listening.
 - **Auracast:** Uses Bluetooth to stream audio directly to hearing aids or to a receiver with an accessory for listening. Not all hearing aids are capable of connecting directly to Auracast.
- **Learn about each system's advantages and limitations:** Compare each system's features, functionality, and limitations.

Communicate with and Learn from Other Houses of Worship and Community Venues that Have Implemented or Plan to Implement Assistive Listening

- **Reach out to others:** Contact other local or regional houses of worship, community centers, or similar local venues to learn about their experiences with assistive listening systems.
- **Gather feedback:** Ask about which equipment manufacturers and installers they contacted and used, what systems they selected and why, what challenges they encountered, and how they overcame those challenges.
- **Take a field trip:** Attend events at venues in the community that have successfully implemented various systems and try out their solutions with staff, congregants with hearing loss, and volunteers.

Investigate Any Accessibility Requirements Under the ADA or State and Local Laws

- **Review the ADA:** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) generally exempts houses of worship from ADA requirements. However, local regulations may rely on the ADA for setting their requirements.
- **Check state and local regulations:** Research any additional accessibility requirements that might apply at the state or local level, including required installation standards or additional accommodations, especially for new construction, renovations, or any other building modifications.
- **Consult with an expert:** If necessary, consult with an accessibility expert, such as the ADA National Network or ADA.gov, or a legal advisor to ensure full compliance with relevant laws and regulations.

Determine the Budget for Initial Installation and Ongoing Maintenance and Support

- **Set a budget:** Determine the overall budget for the initial installation, including equipment, labor, and any necessary upgrades to existing systems.
- **Account for maintenance costs:** Estimate the ongoing costs for system maintenance, including regular maintenance, technical support, and repairs.
- **Explore funding options:** Consider fundraising options (e.g., campaigns, grants, donations, etc.) to help cover the costs of the system installation and maintenance.

Contact Assistive Listening System Manufacturers and Local Installers to Learn More About Their Products and Business Practices

- **Discuss your needs:** Include in your discussion the information you've gathered about congregant activities and needs, the characteristics of the activity spaces, existing audio equipment, and budget.
- **Request information:** Ask about different types of assistive listening systems and the advantages and limitations of each type of system the manufacturer/installer offers.
- **Ask for product demos:** Contact manufacturers for product demonstrations or trials to evaluate the effectiveness of different systems in your specific space(s).
- **Inquire about costs, warranties, and support:** Ask about installation costs, warranties, technical support, and ongoing maintenance services.
- **Get multiple quotes and references:** Obtain quotes from several installers to ensure competitive pricing and value for the system that best fits your needs; ask for references for completed work in other venues, preferably houses of worship.

Evaluate Any System for Its Usability and the Training and Support Needed for Ongoing Regular Use and Maintenance

- **Test for ease of use:** Ensure the system is intuitive and easy for the staff, volunteers, and congregants to operate.
- **Provide user training and listening sessions:** Hold training and listening sessions for everyone who uses or maintains the system to teach them how to use it, including how to position and operate microphones, connect to the system, and troubleshoot issues. These sessions should be held separately from events and activities when the system needs to be used for communication access and should be repeated for new staff, volunteers, and congregants.
- **Establish support channels:** Set up a clear system for reporting technical issues and ensuring quick resolutions, including support from the system manufacturer or installer.

Create a Plan for Long-Term Maintenance and Support for Regular Use of the System

- **Develop a maintenance schedule:** Plan regular check-ups or inspections of the system to ensure it continues to function properly, which may include cleaning, testing, checking batteries, and completing any necessary updates.
- **Designate staff or volunteers:** Assign specific individuals to perform listening checks and ensure the system is ready for use at each service or event.
- **Set up a feedback system:** Regularly gather feedback from users to identify any areas for improvement or issues with the system that may arise over time.

Notes:

1. *With any assistive listening system, the quality of the sound delivered to the system will directly affect the sound received by the user. During a live event, good-quality microphones placed in the right position and used properly are essential for a successful, effective listening experience.*
2. *Listening to an assistive listening system is essential when choosing, learning how to use, and maintaining a system to make sure it delivers consistently clear, high-quality sound. Anyone should be able to listen using an assistive listening system, whether they have hearing loss or use hearing devices. All systems should offer a receiver to connect to the system and an accessory, such as headphones, for listening.*