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Hearing Protection Matters: Delivering Hearing Safety and Hearing Conservation in your Community

Presenter: Joe Freed

Welcome everyone and thank you for joining today's session on delivering hearing safety and hearing conservation in your community. As hearing professionals, your work often focuses on diagnosing and treating hearing loss once it has already occurred, but you also play a critical role in prevention. Today's session will highlight strategies you can use to bring hearing conservation beyond your clinic walls into schools, workplaces, recreational groups and the broader community. I want to start off with I'm Joe Freed with Soundgear. I've been with Starkey for about four years now.

One of the things with my background is my grandmother who is actually 102. We fit her with hearing aids several years. I believe she was 99, but that actually prompted my mother to get hearing aids. She did have a very low loss, but that really made me start thinking about the proactive side. So that's where it really got me into the hearing protection and conservation side as I saw my mother and my grandmother experiencing hearing loss and the things that went along with it.

So when we talk about hearing protection, I always like to really drive home the fact that we're not only protecting their hearing, we're also protecting their brain health. More and more studies have been tied to brain health, whether it be through portions of hearing loss causing depression, Alzheimer's being tied to dementia, risk of falling, all of those things. So one thing I'll reiterate again at the end here is we're not only protecting their hearing, we're also protecting their overall brain health. So before we get started, I wanted to go over some housekeeping things first. If you would like to ask questions, please do so using the Q and A feature.

We will have a team member online to answer questions as we go along. A PDF handout for this presentation may be accessed through your pending courses on AO and it is also posted as a handout in the chat feature as a PDF, so please feel free to download that if you need it. CEUs are available through Audiology Online with the paid membership pending passing the multiple Choice exam and this course is good for CEU credit with a paid membership to Audiology Online. After you complete the

course today, go to your pending Course section of Audiology Online. Pass the exam to earn your ceu.

If you have any technical issues, feel free to either call or email AO directly or use the Q and A window to report any issues. If you have someone from Audiology Online or excuse me, we have somebody from Audiology Online here to monitor in case you have any technical issues.

So this slide just briefly here on the risks and benefits associated with this course. You can read through this at your own leisure and it is included in today's handout as well. So if that's needed, that's where you can find that.

So starting off really just want to touch on the four learning objections or objectives of the course today. So we want to understand the scope of noise induced hearing loss in communities. We're going to identify opportunities for outreach, we'll review some protection solutions and counseling strategies and we're also going to explore some scenario based examples of community engagement. So this talk is going to focus is on equipping you with the tools, approach and confidence that in delivering hearing safety where it is most needed.

So I really want to start with the big picture here. According to the CDC, roughly 22 million US workers are exposed to hazardous noise each year. But it is not just occupational issue. Recreational noise exposure is rising quickly, especially among the younger population. So Studies suggest that one in four adults under 70 has a measurable sign of noise induced hearing loss.

But much of it goes unrecognized. Globally, the World Health Organization estimates that over a billion young people are at risk for hearing loss due to unsafe listening practices. So if you think of concerts, earbuds, video games, motorsports, all of those things, why does it matter? Because noise induced hearing loss is permanent, but it is also 100% preventable. So that's where you as hearing professionals can make a tremendous impact.

So when we take a look at who's at most risks, there's several groups that stand out, children and teens being one of them. One thing with prolonged use of personal listening devices and exposure to loud environments like school gyms or band practices, industrial and construction workers. Even with OSHA standards, compliance is often inconsistent. And then hunters, recreational shooters, the impulse noises from firearms is one of the leading causes of noise induced hearing loss. Also musicians and motorsport enthusiasts, they are exposed to high level of sound in those passion driven activities.

And then also older adults. Many continue noisy hobbies or part time work and may be less aware of the risk. So touching on all of those children and teens, you see them walking around with headphones in quite often. When I was draw growing up, that's when we started to have the plug in headphones listening to music extremely loud. Wasn't really aware of noise induced hearing loss.

It wasn't really front of mind. Awareness wasn't a thing. Even with construction workers and industrial where OSHA has standards, compliance wasn't always there either. Just because you have foam plugs or you have hearing protection may be available, doesn't necessarily people are going to use it or use it correctly. Hunters and shooters just in the past it hasn't again awareness been a big portion of it, but also now just bringing it to the forefront that while you're doing these activities, you do have options that can let you hear while doing them is something that we need to get out there.

And musicians and motorsports. Again, if you've ever been to those type of activities, whether a concert, you're playing in it, you're going to it, motorsport events, whether it be race cars, dirt bikes, very loud. So identifying these groups really helps us think strategically about where to deliver education and intervention in the community.

So hearing professionals like yourself, we're uniquely positioned to lead hearing conservation because you combine clinical experience with your patient trust. Traditionally, hearing conservation has been

thought of in terms of OSHA compliance, annual tests, standard protection for workers. But in reality, prevention is much broader. In clinic, you're already counseling patients about safe listening and recommending hearing protection. But your role doesn't have to stop there.

When hearing professionals engage with schools, employers, clubs, community groups, we extend our reach to people who may never have walked into a clinic until it's too late. So this course is about how to take your experience and your expertise and bring it to those spaces in meaning actionable ways.

So this is really the heart of today's course. Practical ways to deliver hearing conservation beyond the clinic. Here are a few strategies that have really worked well for professionals across the country. So being with one of our top areas of individuals at risk being children and younger individuals, school outreach programs are excellent way to get involved. You can partner with school nurses, band directors, you can talk to them about giving safety listening demonstrations.

Bring in visual demos like sound level meters to help students connect the dots. Being able to show them this is the decibel level in a gymnasium is a great way to show them. Oh, it's even loud when we're at a basketball game. So you can really also think about at the school events, maybe offering optional screenings on site, things along those lines to really get you engaged. One thing also with schools is they are generally very receptive.

They're a learning atmosphere. So why wouldn't they want to learn about something that can help their brain health going on from there? Another great way to engage is with employer partnerships. So many companies already require to have and provide hearing conservation programs and they're definitely going to be welcome to outside experts. You can help by offering annual baseline screenings.

You can do in service trainings or impression takings for custom products right at Workplace. So if you've ever been at an event and you've offered impressions, you probably saw this. If you're giving

somebody your impressions, kind of a crowd build, they want to see what's going on. They want to get an understanding of what you're doing. So that's really one way to really gauge engagement at an employer partnership event.

Another great way is going to be our recreational groups. So this one's a little bit more broad. But any recreational group, whether it be connecting with a local hunting club, motorsports associations, when you think of car clubs, music venues, all of these different areas, you can work with them on maybe setting up a booth at one of their events. Maybe they have a car show going on at a parking lot and you're able to talk to them about setting up a booth there or going to a trap shooting event. A lot of high schools are doing that as well.

So you could pair a recreational group with a school group. So when you set up those booths, you can provide education. You can look at doing quick screenings, or again, the impressions that really draw that crowd in. Or even a simple sign ask me about hearing conservation and protection goes a really long way. You have that sign up.

It really just gives people the opportunity to say, hey, you know, tell me about hearing conservation. I'd like to learn a little bit more. It really makes people comfortable and help them just open up the conversation. And another great way is public health campaigns. So this is utilizing your clinic, social media, maybe your local newspaper.

A lot of times there's local health fairs where you can go in and share safe listening tips. Something as simple as a decibel comparison chart can make the risk tangible for people. So by positioning yourself as both a clinician and a community educator, not only do you help prevent hearing loss, but you also strengthen your visibility as a trusted local resource.

When we talk about hearing protection in these community contexts, it's important to keep the education safe, simple and clear. So you kind of have two different avenues when it comes to hearing protection. You have passive hearing protection. These are the most familiar for people, whether it be foam plugs, earmuffs, filter plugs. They're generally inexpensive and effective when worn correctly.

But compliance can be low because they block out everything, including speech and environmental awareness and going back to the effectiveness portion when worn correctly. So that's an area where people generally need education on how to properly insert them and keep them inserted, whether it be taking the foam plugs out and re putting them back in, or making sure that you have them positioned correctly in Your ear. The other portion from passive is active hearing protection or active electronic protection. These are level dependent devices that allow safe sounds through while reducing dangerous noise. For example, when wearing active electronic hearing protection, hunters can still hear game movement.

They can still have conversations with their hunting partners, but they're protected from the gunfire. So as hearing professionals, we can explain these categories without overwhelming people. The key is to match protection to the environment. Passive protection for short term or general use. Active protection for activities where awareness matters, where you want to be situationally aware of what's going on around you.

You want to be able to hear conversations, hear sounds and still protect what matters most. When those loud noises happen, then you'd lean towards the active hearing protection. When you provide screenings and impressions at community events, that's a great time to explain these differences in everyday languages. So when you're at these events, you can explain the difference between passive and active. And there's often an aha moment for the patient who didn't realize that protection could also be functional with that active side.

So when we're talking to community groups or patients, another important distinction is between custom fit and instant fit hearing protection. So instant fit options are great. They're ready to use right away. There's some things like the foam or tri flange tips, they're convenient, low cost, making them great for quick demos at events. First time users, they're ready to go right out of the box.

You put them in and you're protected. The custom fit protection will require taking impressions, but is often more superior, more comfortable and with the consistency of them for your ear. So comfort all of those different things. With the custom fit, it's going to mean people are more likely to wear them regularly. Especially for, you know, shooters, musicians, industrial workers, where comfortability often makes the difference between consistent protection and and unused earplugs in the pocket.

So you can imagine if they're not comfortable, if they make their ears hurt, they're gonna be taking them out and not using them. That's where that custom fit is gonna work. Great long wear use for a shift, maybe six to eight hours, they're able to keep them in their ears without or with eliminating ear exhaustion. So when you're out in the community, say at a hunting expo or employer safety fair, offering to take those impressions on site is a powerful way to connect and educate with action. So obviously the instant fit option you could offer to them there.

But being able to take the impressions on site gives them the opportunity for that custom hearing protection and educating them on why the Comfortability is important if they're needing to wear them for long periods of time. It also shows that the hearing professional is bringing a level of personalization that other sources of hearing protection can't. So not only are you showing your expertise, but you're also bringing that personalization custom fit protection to the person where if they just went somewhere and just bought some muffs or some plugs, they would not get that same personalization.

Another common question you'll hear is at events and in clinics even is a lot of times they'll bring up the noise reduction ratings or nrr. What's important to explain that NRR is a laboratory measurement. In

real world use, protection often delivers a little less attenuation than maybe the label suggests because insertion technique, device condition and then inconsistent use really affects that. So, for example, a plug rated at 26 decibels might realistically provide 20 to 22 decibels of reduction in everyday use. But the key takeaway here for patients and community groups is any protection is better than none.

Proper fit and consistent use is what matters most. So those are some of the key takeaways there.

Oh, I'm going to pop back here one second.

So outside of the proper fit and consistent use mattering most when you take it into a real world setting, so you can kind of imagine if you have 22 DB NRR, most likely that can fall within the mid to low 80s, you can assume that that's the protection that you would get there. So more isn't always better though, because you might block out more sound but not getting lost in technical difficulties. If you do see the NRR of 22 decibels, you can expect that again, if you're at a dangerous noise level, about 100 decibels of noise, it will take it down, as I mentioned, to that low mid-80s. But that's much safer, especially if you're wearing them properly every time. So using it and wearing it properly are the most important.

So moving on. In community outreach, our goal is often to start conversations that later happen in the clinic or that brings them into the clinic. So here's kind of a simple flow you can use both in events and during appointments. So you really want to assess quickly. You can ask the patient or participants about their noise exposure.

So simple questions. Do you use hearing protection when you hunt? How often are you around loud music or tools? From there, educate, simply share just one key fact. Maybe one shot from a rifle can permanently damage your hearing without protection or continued noise exposure over 90 decibels could damage your hearing after 50 minutes.

So just one key fact, it will really get them thinking about it because it's something they probably haven't thought much about before.

Another is match to the lifestyle. So recommend a solution that aligns with their needs. So example, instant fit plugs for someone who occasionally mows the lawn. And then custom hearing protection for a hunter or somebody that's a competitive shooter. They need to be able to hear their environment around them.

They need to be able to hear calls, things along those lines. They're not going to be using instant fit options. Take action again, offer screenings, impressions or a quick fit demo right there. This flow keeps the conversation approachable while giving participants a clear next step. So the goal is to empower, not overload.

So what I'd really like to do is kind of apply it to a couple different scenarios here, give you some examples on just different areas that this could play out. So we could talk about considering like an employer partnership. So you're with a factory supervisor and they invite you to provide screenings during a safety fair. You identify several employees with early signs of noise induced hearing loss. Your role from there could include explaining proper insertion of foam plugs to improve their real world protection.

You could recommend filtered plugs for workers who need to hear speech around them. You could also suggest periodic follow ups testing to monitor if they had any changes. By being present in that workplace, you become the trusted partner in that employee health, not just as a vendor of hearing protection. So you're really educating them and helping them understand that you are a trusted partner in this area.

I want to cover another scenario, maybe considering a sports club or a conservation group. So you can imagine you're at a local gun club hosting a safety night. A member mentions that they usually shoot without protection because foam plugs block out conversation. So here, this is a great opportunity for you to explain that one fact that I talked about earlier. You can explain that permanent risk of even one single gunshot.

Unprotected, you can permanently damage your hearing. You can demonstrate the difference between passive and active hearing, making them aware that there are options outside of passive where they would be able to hear conversations while still protecting. So again, offer impressions on site. You'll see that's a common theme. It is something that works greatly.

Like I said, it will draw groups. If you're offering the impressions on site for the custom solutions, that's one of the other opportunities you have there. That interaction not only protects their hearing, but it also demonstrates the value having an audiologist or a hearing instrument specialist in the community setting brings. So being a hearing professional, you really are demonstrating that value by being there.

So for my third scenario, I kind of want to look at another important part of our population, law enforcement officers. So officers spend a significant amount of time at firearm training ranges, often enclosed spaces where sound pressure from repeated gunfire is especially intense. But beyond training. And now this applies not only to law enforcement, but almost any first responder. They also face unprecedented impact noise while on duty.

So with that, from anything from sirens, machines, other sudden environment noises, cars, buses, trucks, just very unpredictable noises that can happen. The challenge for this group is not only protecting their hearing, they need to remain situationally aware, able to hear commands, communicate with their team, to detect subtle cues in their environment. So traditional foam plugs or earmuffs often block out too much sound, leaving the officer feel cut off or at risk of missing something crucial. And

again, not only for law enforcement, but any first responders, whether it be firefighters, safety protection officers, all of those things. So electronic hearing protection will offer them a solution.

This device or these devices allow soft sounds, speech and environmental cues to pass through naturally while instantly reducing hazardous impulse noise. Officers can stay protected without losing awareness their job demands.

So earlier, as I had mentioned, whether you're at a school event or this can apply to any event doing a decibel reading. So we do have the soundcheck Live app. It's a free app that you can download on your phone. This is a great opportunity to show people, wherever you are, the noise level that you're in. But then also they can take it to their own individual environments and see when their noise environment might be at decibels that could damage their hearing.

One specific one is like basketball. If you're in a high school gymnasium, it can get up to 100 decibels really quick. And that's where you would want to be wearing some hearing protection to lower that down.

So as we close, I want to bring it back to the central idea here. Noise induced hearing loss is a major preventable public health issue. Audiologists, hearing professionals are uniquely positioned to lead prevention not only in the clinic, but in schools, workplace, recreational clubs and the broader community. Education works best when paired with action screenings, impressions or on site demos. Every community has opportunities for hearing professionals to step forward as trusted advocates.

So my challenge to all of you listening is identify one outreach opportunity in your community this month. Whether it is a safety fair, a school talk, a simple social media post, each step will help extend our impact beyond the clinic walls. I want to thank you for joining this session. We will be available to answer chats or answer questions in the chat there and full loop circle. Another thing is to remember

why hearing protection is important, not only protecting their hearing, but protecting their overall brain health.

I want to thank you again for your time here today and have a great rest of your day.

Contact info there joefreedarkey.com if you have any further questions that you want to reach out to me on, feel free to do so.