



North Carolina Self Help For Hard of Hearing People, Inc.

March 19, 2002

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests,

My name is Joan Black, and I am speaking today on behalf of North Carolina Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc.,

Hearing loss is a serious condition, a major life loss that those with good hearing find difficult to understand. By age 65 one out of three people has a hearing loss and it is present in all age groups, both sexes and all races. It is not life threatening, but hearing loss limits a person's ability to interact socially with family and friends, use the telephone easily, communicate with health care providers, and to receive environmental information such as fire alarms and approaching vehicles.

One of the important issues in old age is how to keep good mental health which is essential for a good quality of life. And, numerous studies have demonstrated that the quality of life is linked to the quality of communication. Unfortunately hearing loss often goes unnoticed or misunderstood with hard of hearing persons often being labeled 'difficult to get along with' or 'not being with it' or even senile. Hearing loss is a health issue and studies show that people with hearing loss are at risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, isolation, stress and chemical dependency. There are negative social attitudes about growing old and having a hearing loss.

A friend in an upscale retirement community wrote:

"I am finding that being unable to hear well enough to understand what others are saying, is worse than being in a room by one's self. Just last week I paid to attend a University lecture series but might as well have stayed at home. I won't return, and I wonder how many others are staying away from this valuable series on medical issues because they can't understand – they can't hear – the speakers".

Many elderly people are not receiving appropriate treatment or using potentially beneficial devices, such as hearing aids or assistive listening devices or environmental alerts. Two years ago, a close friend and strong advocate for hard of hearing issues in North Carolina was dying in hospital while unable to

communicate. I intervened by bringing in an easy-to-use assistive listening device for her to use with her family, doctors, nurses, and minister.

Last week at a Senior Citizen Center in Siler City, I was told "I can't afford hearing aids, at \$2,000 each, so I must use pen and paper". A friend from Charlotte, who depends on his hearing aids and hearing assistive technology, said he will be in desperate need by 2004, when his personal funds run dry. Most hearing aids are not covered by insurance or Medicare.

Recommendations:

(1) Hearing Aids are not available for a large portion of North Carolina's senior population due to their relatively high financial cost. We (NC-SHHH) recommend strongly that the Legislature put appropriate pressure on insurance companies, and other funding sources, to include hearing loss as an important part of our senior's comprehensive medical needs.

(2) Almost by definition, the aging population falls under accessibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the North Carolina (Building Code) Accessibility Codes. We (NC-SHHH) recommend strongly that **hearing** provisions of the ADA and North Carolina's appropriate building codes be an integral part of all State required/mandated inspections, licensing agreements, and facility operating procedures.

(3) And, education - medical personnel, families and the general public need to learn more about, and understand, the communication needs of our senior citizens *with* hearing loss. This is an absolute necessity in all that you are doing here today to improve the quality of life for North Carolina's seniors. We (NC-SHHH) recommend the North Carolina fund a study on **What Do You Do for People with Hearing Loss** that could be included with all legislative and operating guidelines used in our state government's business.

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