



New Communication Van distributes free hearing aids

UPMC and Pitt hope to use the mobile clinic for community outreach, hearing screenings and research studies



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For the last six months or so, Angel Casciato has felt like people are mumbling. During conversations, she's noticed that she has trouble hearing the end of a sentence. And so when she found out that a new mobile "Communication Van" would be doing free hearing screenings right before a play that she planned to attend at City Theatre on the South Side, she immediately signed up.

After the screening, on a Thursday night last month, Casciato, 65, held a paper in her hand with the results: They showed that, indeed, her hearing had fallen just below the normal range. She planned to make another appointment for follow-up care.

“If I didn’t have the opportunity for the van, I don’t know that I would have done anything about it,” said Casciato, of Robinson. “But the opportunity arose, and it’s great I took advantage of it.”

The Communication Van is a project of UPMC and the departments of otolaryngology-head & neck surgery and communication science & disorders at the University of Pittsburgh. They hope to use it for community outreach, hearing screenings and research studies.

The van has been in operation for about two months, said Catherine Palmer, a Pitt professor in the department of otolaryngology and director of audiology for UPMC. It has plans to travel as far as Penn State University for the Special Olympics and has already made regular visits to closer places such as Sharpsburg.

“This is giving us a whole new way to reach people, in the city but in rural areas as well,” said Palmer. “We’re more than happy to go on the road.”

One advantage of the van is that wherever it goes, it provides a quiet place for hearing screenings. In the past, those have been difficult to do at large events such as the Special Olympics, said Palmer, because there is so much ambient noise.

Getting the van was serendipitous, said Palmer. Several years ago, she had a conversation with a faculty member at Pitt who mentioned that a van would be useful for research purposes. The colleague did research on stuttering and felt that it would be easier to broaden her base of subjects if she had a research vehicle to go out in the community, rather than relying only on parents able to take their children to Pitt’s campus in Oakland.

Shortly afterwards, Palmer had a conversation with Lawton Snyder, chief executive officer of the Eye and Ear Foundation of Pittsburgh, who had just been approached by the Brother’s Brother Foundation that had a van to donate, and wondered if the foundation had a use for it.

The foundation and Pitt came up with a concept for the van to be used not just for hearing screenings, but also for research and as a presence at community events.

It took time for the van to be designed and built to those specifications before it debuted this summer.

At City Theatre, the van's visit was timed to coincide with a performance of "Another Kind of Silence," a play that features multiple characters who are hearing impaired and use American Sign Language.

In addition to the free hearing screenings in the van, Pitt graduate students distributed ear protection specifically designed for concerts and offered to show guests how to use features on a smartphone that can assist the hearing impaired. For example, Apple AirPods can be used as amplification devices, and speech-to-text apps or features such as live captions can add closed captioning to a movie or speech.

In some cases, those who come to the van for screenings are fitted for hearing aids that same day, free of charge. Hearing aids are often not covered by insurance, and can cost thousands of dollars out of pocket.

Pitt already runs or partners with three brick-and-mortar clinics that do hearing screenings and distribute hearing aids free of charge — at the Birmingham Free Clinic in Uptown, the Wellness Pavilion in Homewood and the Squirrel Hill Health Center in Squirrel Hill. The mobile van will expand that reach.

"No one in Western Pennsylvania should go without hearing aids," said Palmer. "People don't necessarily know that."

It is often life-changing for people who suddenly have the ability to hear after years of coping with life without it.

"There are so many tears involved in this, and so that's an interesting experience too, for the students to see that kind of emotion," said Palmer. "Because people didn't pursue them: They thought they were out of reach, and suddenly they can hear."

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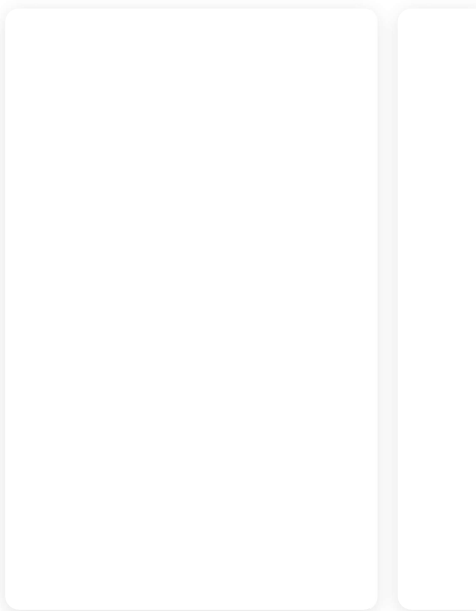
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