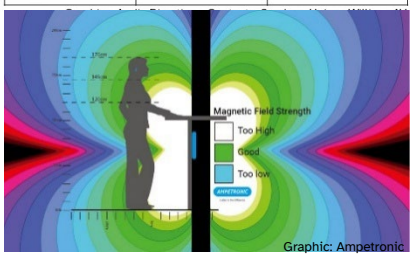
Center for Hearing Access
at The Shedd Institute

# HIPAA and Service Counter Hearing Loops

## Intent

**Purpose:** Explain why counter hearing loops are HIPAA compliant.
**Audience:** Healthcare staff, providers, and compliance personnel.



Graphic: Ampetronic

## Background

A counter hearing loop (sometimes called a "service desk loop") is an assistive listening system that transmits speech directly from staff at a service counter to a patient's hearing aid or cochlear implant processor when set to the telecoil ("T-coil") program. A person without hearing instruments should be able to borrow a receiver and headphones. The 'wireless' loop signal is limited to the designated counter area. It ensures patients with hearing loss can hear clearly and privately. Counter hearing loops are recognized as an auxiliary aid under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which requires providers to ensure effective communication with patients who have hearing loss.

Permanent counter hearing loops are preferred because the signal coverage area can be adjusted accurately to meet IEC standards, ensuring it covers only the designated area where users stand (or sit), with proper microphone selection and placement (sometimes affixed) and continuous power.

## HIPAA Considerations

HIPAA requires covered entities (healthcare providers, health plans, etc.) to safeguard *protected health information (PHI)* from unauthorized disclosure. Counter hearing loops support this requirement because:

- They transmit speech directly to a patient's personal hearing device: they are not a broadcast system.
- They do not record or store PHI.
- They are no less private than ordinary speech at a front desk. In many cases, loops are *more confidential* than alternatives such as raising one's voice or using a speakerphone, which may carry farther into public spaces.

## Best Practices

- Staff should continue to follow reasonable safeguards for privacy, such as not discussing sensitive information in waiting areas.
- For especially private matters, staff should offer to move the patient to a private office or room.

## Conclusion

Using a counter hearing loop at check-in, pharmacy counters, and other public settings does not violate HIPAA. In fact, it helps providers meet their obligations under both the ADA and HIPAA by improving communication access while maintaining patient privacy.

Developed by Kathy Johnson, © 10/4/25, 10/21/25, 2/8/26

## About the Center for Hearing Access

Founded in 2024, the nonprofit Center for Hearing Access is a national advocacy and education initiative of The John G. Shedd Institute. We champion and educate users, sites, audiologists, and hearing instrument specialists about all ADA-compliant assistive listening systems and other strategies to increase access to theaters, libraries, conferences, government offices, courtrooms, places of worship, and other public and private spaces. Effective hearing access can be life-changing for people with hearing loss.