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## **With new session will come new technological improvements for Assembly**

### ***Hearing loop system installed to make legislative activities more accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing***



STATE HOUSE – Under the leadership of House Speaker Nicholas A. Mattiello and President of the Senate M. Teresa Paiva Weed, the State House rooms most often used by the public have been upgraded with new state-of-the-art equipment to better accommodate deaf or hard-of-hearing visitors, and other technological improvements have also been made in advance of the new legislative session.

A new hearing loop system, which is a wireless network that transmits sound to telecoils used in digital hearing aids, has been installed in five of the most-used rooms in the State House: Room 35 (where House Finance Committee hearings are held), the State Room (Room 222), the largest Senate hearing room (Room 313) the Senate gallery and both House galleries. For those rooms without a hearing loop system, the General Assembly also has a new FM Assistive Listening Device system that is available.

The new hearing loop system will make it possible for wearers of digital hearing aids or cochlear implants to tune into a signal when a speaker speaks into a microphone. Some advanced hearing aids will even detect the signal automatically. Wireless loop systems employ technology that allows background noise to be filtered out, allowing users to clearly hear only the person speaking into a microphone, and they do not require that a room be equipped with a full public address system with speakers.

“We have worked hard in the last three years to make the State House more open, transparent and accessible to all Rhode Islanders. I am proud that this latest round of technological improvements will ensure that deaf or hard of hearing guests can fully participate in state government,” said House Speaker Mattiello (D-Dist. 15, Cranston).

Said President of the Senate Paiva Weed (D-Dist. 13, Newport, Jamestown), “About one in five Rhode Islanders has hearing loss of some kind. That’s a very significant segment of our population, including many senior citizens who have been dedicated voters and taxpayers all their lives. They deserve to be able to fully participate when they come to the State House, just like everyone else. This is a good investment that I hope will encourage more people to come here, listen and be heard.”

The new hearing loop system replaces an outdated and difficult-to-maintain system in legislative hearing rooms and other spaces that used to require all users to wear headsets, which were limited in number and required users to know where to find them. (Wireless headsets will be available for the new system to those who do not have hearing aids or implants equipped to receive the signal, and there will be signs informing those who need them of where to get them.)

The system was paid for in large part by \$50,000 from the Rhode Island Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing’s Emergency and Public Communication Access Program, as well as \$10,000 from the General Assembly’s operational budget.

Rhode Island Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Executive Director Steven A. Florio, who helped coordinate the selection and installation of the system with General Assembly staff, said the new system will go a long way towards complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act, specifically for those taxpayers and visitors who rely heavily on this state-of-the-art technological equipment as an effective accommodation. Not only will the new system require less maintenance and provide more reliable, high quality sound to users, but just as importantly, will create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for the deaf and hard of hearing community. It will allow for more people to hear and understand activities and require fewer people to seek out and wear headsets in order to participate.

“There’s a lot happening at the State House that affects our communities, so it’s important for us to have access here. Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals are taxpayers and voters, and they have an interest in participating in the process,” said Florio.

In addition to the hearing loop system, television screens have been installed in the House galleries to allow those sitting there to see closed captioning on the live transmission of the House while it is in session. Such screens already exist in the Senate gallery. Also, Assembly leaders plan to provide closed captioning for more hearings and events broadcast on Capitol Television beginning this year.

In addition to the accessibility improvements for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, legislators’ desktop computers in the House and Senate chambers are also currently being upgraded with easier-to-use and more technologically advanced tablets.

For more information, contact:  
**Meredyth R. Whitty**, Publicist  
State House Room 20  
Providence, RI 02903  
(401) 222-1923