

Limited Access to Audiology Services in Florida Assisted Living Communities

BACKGROUND

Florida has the highest percentage of older adults in the United States, and over 631,000 of these individuals have a hearing-related disability.¹ Hearing loss can be effectively treated with audiology services, but estimates suggest that about 40% of older adults are not utilizing these services.² This presents a serious issue as untreated hearing loss can lead to increased risk of isolation, cognitive decline, and falls.³ It is therefore essential to provide audiology services throughout Florida, particularly in the 3,070 assisted living communities (ALC) that are home to more than 100,000 residents.⁴ Currently, there is no state policy that requires ALCs to provide audiology services. ALCs are allowed to contract with audiologists to perform hearing consultations, but we do not know the extent to which any audiology services are offered. As such, this policy brief reports on older adults' access to audiology services across Florida, specifically focusing on the presence of these services near ALCs.

STUDY METHOD

Data on ALCs and audiology services came from the state Agency for Healthcare Administration (AHCA).^{*} ALC locations were matched to the 2010 U.S. Census county data.⁵ Audiology clinic addresses were then collected from *Healthy Hearing*⁶ and matched to the previously collected county data. Additional data on the number of older adults living in each county and the

prevalence of hearing loss in 2018 was collected from the Florida Department of Health.⁷

FINDINGS

No audiology clinics existed for nearly 40% of Florida counties (27 of 67), accounting for about 145,000 people aged 65 and older. An additional 14 counties that had at least one audiology clinic have no ALCs with audiology services (Charlotte, Citrus, Clay, Columbia, Flagler, Hernando, Martin, Monroe, Nassau, Okaloosa, Osceola, Saint Lucie, Santa Rosa, and Suwannee).

As expected, counties with no audiology clinics (except Walton), also had no ALCs that provided audiology services. Overall, only 97 ALCs in 17 counties had at least one ALC with an audiology clinic. This translated into only 3% of all ALCs in Florida.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This research shows that many older adults lack audiology services, especially those in ALCs. This is a concern because the need for audiology services will continue to grow as the population of older adults with hearing loss increases. Treating hearing loss is important not only for older adults' quality of life, but to help prevent other chronic conditions.³

A possible solution to the lack of audiology services may exist in the delivery of services through electronic interfaces, known as tele-audiology.⁸ This technology would allow a single audiologist to

*Data was collected on November 4, 2019

diagnose and supply hearing aids to a greater number of patients over a greater distance. By implementing tele-audiology into their practices, audiologists would be able to expand their services to treat hearing loss in additional counties in Florida. Policy makers should consider promoting the benefits of audiology services and providing incentives for audiology clinics to expand to underserved areas of Florida.

REFERENCES

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Table 1. The Number of ALCs and Audiology Clinics by County in Florida.

County	Number of ALCs	Number of Audiology Clinics	Number of ALCs w/ Audiology	Population, 2018
Alachua	12	1	1	35,866
Baker	1	0	0	3,807
Bay	12	1	1	30,643
Bradford	2	0	0	5,030
Brevard	129	6	4	136,070
Broward	275	12	11	309,167
Calhoun	2	0	0	2,722
Charlotte	20	3	0	69,190
Citrus	23	3	0	52,130
Clay	16	2	0	32,528
Collier	33	1	5	115,680
Columbia	9	1	0	12,827
Desoto	4	0	0	7,823
Dixie	0	0	0	3,927
Duval	89	2	7	130,488
Escambia	25	1	1	52,242
Flagler	21	1	0	32,598
Franklin	0	0	0	2,822
Gadsden	4	0	0	8,266
Gilchrist	0	0	0	3,586
Glades	0	0	0	3,571
Gulf	1	0	0	3,366
Hamilton	3	0	0	2,596
Hardee	3	0	0	4,414
Hendry	1	0	0	5,272
Hernando	27	1	0	51,160
Highlands	9	1	1	35,942
Hillsborough	260	4	7	198,970
Holmes	2	0	0	4,020
Indian River	20	1	1	49,033
Jackson	2	0	0	9,671
Jefferson	0	0	0	3,354
Lafayette	2	0	0	1,346
Lake	49	4	1	90,800
Lee	62	5	6	201,800
Leon	18	1	1	37,473
Levy	0	0	0	10,158
Liberty	2	0	0	1,269
Madison	7	0	0	3,881
Manatee	42	2	1	102,252
Marion	34	4	1	101,739

Martin	18	3	0	47,402
Miami-Dade	822	6	4	447,396
Monroe	3	3	0	16,595
Nassau	6	1	0	17,950
Okaloosa	13	2	0	31,139
Okeechobee	1	0	0	8,522
Orange	110	3	2	160,006
Osceola	34	1	0	46,646
Palm Beach	189	10	12	339,885
Pasco	47	3	1	116,794
Pinellas	178	8	11	235,341
Polk	40	4	1	137,262
Putnam	10	0	0	16,550
Saint Johns	19	2	1	47,791
Saint Lucie	78	2	0	71,952
Santa Rosa	11	2	0	27,454
Sarasota	85	4	7	150,135
Seminole	60	7	1	70,106
Sumter	12	2	4	71,624
Suwannee	2	2	0	9,453
Taylor	0	0	0	4,391
Union	0	0	0	2,263
Volusia	100	5	3	128,412
Wakulla	0	0	0	4,885
Walton	4	0	1	13,447
Washington	7	0	0	4,431

Source: Healthy Hearing; Licensing and Surveying Agency for Healthcare Administration.

Note. ALC= Assisted living community.