



## East Bay Chapter Newsletter

**JANUARY 2026**

Chapter E-mail: [Info@HearingLossEB.org](mailto:Info@HearingLossEB.org)

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### January 10, 2026, Meeting:

Welcome to the first meeting of our 40th Anniversary year and please join us for a presentation from **Brooke Barry, a researcher in the Sound and Music Perception Lab of Dr. Jiam of UCSF**. Brooke will break down the current understanding of music perception in cochlear implant users, how it differs/impacts from speech perception, and why those differences matter for both research and rehabilitation. She will also provide some background on what it's like to be a cochlear implant researcher, duties and skills involved, and where it might lead. Brooke Barry received a B.S in physiological science and a B.A in music performance from UCLA. Her research on music perception in cochlear implants, combines her passion for music and music theory with her knowledge of anatomy and the ear. She has plans to go to medical school.

- **9:30 a.m.: Social and Refreshments**
- **10:00 a.m.: Presentation (Zoomers can join at 10 am)**
- **11:30 a.m.: Complimentary Pizza**

**Location: Kaiser Permanente, Fabiola Building,  
3801 Howe St, Basement Room G-26, Oakland, CA.**

**FREE PARKING** is available across the street at the Kaiser parking structure.

**Please come to the in-person meeting to meet the speaker, meet others who have hearing loss and enjoy complementary refreshments.**

**The meeting is available both In-Person and Virtual (Zoom).**

**Please register at: [www.HearingLossEB.org](http://www.HearingLossEB.org) by 5 PM, Friday, Jan. 9, 2026.**

*Questions? [Info@HearingLossEB.org](mailto:Info@HearingLossEB.org)*

HLAA-EB posts our newsletters to the California State Association webpage and a link on our website. **VOLUNTEER! Contact us to let us know you are available!** Check out our website at: <http://www.HearingLossEB.org/> Contact us at: [Info@HearingLossEB.org](mailto:Info@HearingLossEB.org)

**Coming Soon:**

- **February, 2026: Nancy Rubin speaking about the Sound Advice Project, [https://www.nancyjrubin.com/sound advice](https://www.nancyjrubin.com/sound%20advice)**

**NOTE:** If you have old hearing aids you no longer use, you may donate them. Drop them off at a meeting and we will make sure your hearing aids get new life for someone else. Also, bring any hearing assistive technology items you no longer use that you may have (such as a Roger Pen or??) to a meeting to see if anyone at the meeting can use them.

## **MEETING NOTES: “*Navigating Your Hearing Health Care: Take Control of Your Hearing Journey*”**

At our Dec. 13, 2025 HLAA-East Bay Chapter meeting, our guest speaker was Dr. Susanna Storm, Au.D., CCC-A, FAAA, making a return visit to give us a follow-up presentation on the importance of navigating our hearing health and some of the ways we can take control of our own hearing journey. She cited some of the common questions about hearing loss which she has encountered from patients, friends, and family over her 20-year career as an audiologist. Dr. Storm then proceeded in sharing technological advancements in hearing aids (HA’s) and other assistive devices (AD’s) that are improving the lives of individuals with hearing loss, as well as some practical tips and actionable advice that may help us to achieve our best possible hearing outcomes.



- ***Our Speaker’s Background:*** Dr. Storm initially provided us with a quick look of her own family background, as well as her academic and career background before she opened her current place of business, Blue Sky Hearing (BSH). Our speaker Dr. Storm was raised by parents who were a dentist and a hygienist and hoping their daughter might choose a career in dentistry. Nevertheless, after taking some audiology classes and volunteering at CID where children got cochlear implants (CI’s) and learned to use their CI’s at school, she then went on to a doctoral program at Washington University School of Medicine, rotating through both pediatric and adult audiology clinics specializing in hearing loss, CI’s. and intraoperative monitoring.

Wanting to apply her audiology degree, as well as her new and expanding knowledge of audiology technology, Dr. Storm decided to open her audiology practice in Berkeley, CA where she currently serves as both President/CEO and audiologist at Blue Sky Hearing & Audiology, Inc. With the help of her dedicated BSH assistants, Dr. Storm said that she attempts to identify the needs of each patient rather than merely trying to sell a service or product.

- *How Hearing & the Brain Work Together:* Dr. Storm first reminded us that sound processing is quite a complex procedure, even when the brain works with normal hearing. However, it is even more challenging in those individuals with hearing loss since the brain does not process sound in the same way. Technology is now available to enhance speech understanding and reduce noise (S/N ratio) when sound is sent to one's brain that does not process sound in the same way as in people with normal hearing.

Yet, it's taken many years and hundreds of millions of dollars for researchers/manufacturers to conduct the kind of research necessary in replicating the complicated workings of the brain and binaural (2 ears) processing. Then researchers/manufacturers have had to work hard to come up with the technology in hearing devices that will help process sound in the manner our brain is designed to do.

- *Common Questions:* Meanwhile, Dr. Storm wanted to talk to us about several of the common questions regularly raised by patients, friends and family over the last years.

- ✓ When do people seek hearing help?

The average delay is 7 years before seeking treatment. In fact, only 20% of those who could benefit from hearing aids use them. Why the delay? Hearing loss is connected to so many things, such as physical & emotional issues, stigma, and perhaps your healthcare provider has not mentioned that you need to have your hearing tested.

Even if your healthcare provider has not suggested that you get your hearing tested, there are some guidelines for getting your hearing tested. AAA/ASHA recommends having your hearing screened every 10 years until age 50 and then every 3 years after that. BSH follows AAA/ASHA guidelines up until hearing loss is diagnosed and then recommends testing annually or if there is a family history of hearing loss. Dr. Storm offered these reasons for following this testing schedule:

- Establishes your hearing baseline.
- Helps to track future changes in your hearing.
- Helps diagnose, intervene & treat problems early (key in overall brain function).
- May help identify other medical conditions to which hearing is connected.
- May prevent further damage (NIHL).

- ✓ Where do people go to have their hearing tested?

Once you have decided to get your hearing tested, the real issue becomes one of finding a healthcare provider who can test your hearing. Does it matter where you go? If so, how do you go about finding a hearing healthcare provider/an audiologist who is right for you? Here are some things to consider:

- Audiology "Best Practices".
- "Feel" of office & provider.
- Services available.
- Hearing device road to success.
- Accessories.
- Auditory training.
- Your insurance benefits.

- ✓ *What is "Best Practices"?*

"Best Practices" refers to a method or approach that is widely accepted as the most effective and efficient way to achieve a desired outcome, based on evidence, experience, and consensus. It's the 'Gold Standard'. "Best Practices" in audiology includes the following components. but unfortunately, being applied by only 50% of audiologists and 30% of hearing aid dispensers:

- Conducting comprehensive assessment.

- Patient-centered care.
  - Evidence-based amplification.
  - Aural rehabilitation.
  - Ethical & legal standards.
  - On-going monitoring & follow-up.
- *The Trifecta:* As Dr. Storm continued to take us on the hearing journey, she wanted to review the three components of the *Trifecta*: Hearing aid technology, accessories, and auditory training.
- ✓ *Hearing Aid Technology:* Hearing aid manufacturers are always trying to develop new technology that focuses on improving binaural processing, the S/N ratio and overall speech clarity. Here's some examples of a few hearing aid manufacturers and their updated technological improvements in their hearing aids. As noted by Dr. Storm, hearing devices most appropriate for any patient should be based on structured testing in the audiologist's clinic.
    - *Oticon Intent:* More sound intelligence that analyzes the sound & organizes the sound around the user; enhanced connectivity through Bluetooth & Auracast ready technology for seamless connectivity with various devices; charge 4 hours for 20 hours of wear time.
    - *Phonak Sphere Infinio:* AI enhanced speech clarity in noisy environments; innovative Infinio platform designed to offer exceptional sound clarity, reduced listening effort & enhanced connectivity; enhanced performance with greater processing power; charge 3 hours for 18 hours of wear time.
    - *Phonak Life:* Moisture protection with highest rating for moisture & debris resistance that allows device to be submerged without long-term moisture issues.
    - *Widex Smart Ric:* S/N ratio improvement up to 5Db that can improve speech understanding up to 50%; microphone covers that limit wind & touch noise enhancing comfort.
    - *Bluetooth Connectivity:* Bluetooth is an amazing wireless technology that exchanges data between devices within a short distance. Bluetooth is useful in connecting to your phone, ipad, or other devices, thereby allowing you to directly stream phone calls, audiobooks, music, videos, and much more to your hearing aids.
  - ✓ *Hearing Aid Accessories:* Dr. Storm next identified several hearing aid accessories and their benefits.
    - *Oticon's Connect Clip Microphone:* Can be clipped onto a speaker to improve audio quality and is especially good for 1-1 conversations & small group settings, but not as effective in noisy environments, such as noisy restaurant situations.
    - *TV Connector:* Connects to your TV & allows audio from your TV to be directly streamed to your hearing aids.
    - *Remote Control:* An easy way of adjusting volume & program with the device.

- *Phonak Roger System*: Handles background noise with noise reduction built into the system.
  - *Smoke Detectors & Bed Shakers*: Research has shown that those persons with mild to moderate high frequency hearing loss (HFHL) have only a 50% chance of being awakened by the high frequency signals emitted by many standard smoke detectors during a residential fire. Therefore, you may want to find a smoke detector that emits a lower frequency signal and also add bed shakers.
  - *Widex Sound Assist & Sound Connect*: Tools for improving hearing in different environments.
  - *Auracast System*: Auracast may improve accessibility for persons with hearing loss. Oticon, Phonak, Widex Signia, Starkey, and Resound are “Auracast Ready” with firmware updates that can be done in the auditory clinic or even sent through your app.
- ✓ *Auditory Training Exercises*: There exist many useful apps such as audiobooks and physical books to use in auditory training. Dr. Storm went on to describe the LACE AI Pro auditory training program of brain exercises that may help users improve their hearing and brain function. LACE AI Pro offers a series of engaging personalized exercises that you can do in just 15 minutes a day. The exercises can help you:
- Improve how you hear and understand sounds,
  - Boost your brain’s ability to process information,
  - Adjusts to your needs,
  - Fits easily into your daily routine.
- *Questions to Ask in finding A Hearing Healthcare Provider*: There are several important questions you should ask as you seek and find the hearing healthcare provider right for you:
- ✓ *What testing is available?*
  - ✓ *Can they remove wax?*
  - ✓ *How is the decision made to order hearing aids from a specific manufacturer?*
  - ✓ *How do you subjectively assess my hearing needs?*
  - ✓ *Do you objectively assess hearing devices to verify functionality and efficacy?*
  - ✓ *Do you offer auditory accessories and auditory training?*
  - ✓ *What is the counseling/learning process?*
  - ✓ *What tools do you have at your disposal?*
  - ✓ *What kind of aftercare can I expect after I am fitted with hearing devices?*
  - ✓ *How do you deal with programming adjustments?*
  - ✓ *What is the continued maintenance schedule?*
  - ✓ *How does pricing for services/devices work?*
- *Questions to Ask Your Insurance Provider*:
- ✓ *Who am I speaking with?*
  - ✓ *What is the reference number for this call?*
  - ✓ *Do I have a hearing aid benefit? Is it an in-network or out-of-network benefit?*
  - ✓ *Is this for 1 or 2 hearing aids?*
  - ✓ *Am I eligible today?*
  - ✓ *How often can this benefit be used?*

- ✓ *What is the dollar max?*
- ✓ *Is there any co-insurance?*
- ✓ *Have I met my deductible?*
- ✓ *Does my plan cover any services associated with the care and maintenance of hearing aids?*

➤ *What Medicare Does Cover and What Medicare Doesn't Cover:*

- ✓ Medicare covers 1 hearing test a year, unless medically necessary for additional tests.
- ✓ As of 2024, you no longer need a physician's referral for a hearing test as long as you do not have sudden hearing loss or acute vertigo.
- ✓ This gives you greater freedom to pick based on what practice and provider fits you and not just who your physician refers you to.
- ✓ As of December 2025, Medicare does not have a hearing aid benefit. They do not pay toward the cost of hearing aids nor hearing aid services.

➤ *The Reality about Hearing Aid Benefits:*

- ✓ Many individuals do not have a hearing aid benefit, Medicare or otherwise.
- ✓ If you do your due diligence in finding the right hearing provider for you, this may mean that you are paying out-of-pocket to achieve the most comprehensive services and best hearing possible.
- ✓ It's important that you weigh the pros and cons of your insurance coverage and figure out what is right for you.

➤ *Tips & Takeaways:* Before wrapping up, Dr. Storm took a few moments to share some important tips for individuals with hearing loss to take away and use in planning their next steps in living their best life with hearing loss.

- ✓ *Hearing Testing:* Have your hearing tested by your audiologist periodically, at least annually or more often if you have any new symptoms of hearing loss, so you can get proper hearing device intervention when needed.
- ✓ *Be Proactive in Seeking Help:* Don't wait for a physician referral. Seek testing if you notice changes or have risk factors. Early intervention is crucial for long-term cognitive and overall health.
- ✓ *The Trifecta:* Remember the three important components of *The Trifecta* as you seek out and pursue the best help for your hearing loss.
- ✓ *Hearing Aid Technology Updates:* Check with your audiologist regularly for any new or updated hearing aid technology which might be useful in improving your speech understanding and noise management.
- ✓ *Accessories & Auditory Training:* Check out some of the available hearing accessories and try out some of the available apps with auditory training exercises that may be helpful in gaining speech clarity.
- ✓ *Caption Phones:* Explore the requirements for getting a free amplified closed caption phone through Caption Call, CapTel or CTAP programs.

- ✓ *Cochlear Implants:* Consider getting assessed for cochlear implants if it seems that hearing aids are no longer providing you with sufficient benefit.
  - ✓ *Choose a Hearing Health Care Provider Who Follows Best Practices:* Look for comprehensive assessment, patient-centered care, evidence-based amplification, auditory training, and on-going monitoring.
- *Wrap-Up;* In wrapping up her outstanding presentation, our speaker Dr. Susanna Storm suggested that audience members consider investigating further some of the many resources discussed today. As each of us attempts to improve our hearing and speech understanding by “*navigating our hearing health care*”, Dr. Storm reminded us to step up and “*take control of our hearing journey*”.

Finally, Dr. Storm clarified that she was not recommending or endorsing any specific hearing loss treatment or product for any individual without personal assessment and consultation. Likewise, the HLAA-EB Chapter leadership reminded everyone that the policy of the Chapter is to not endorse any service, product or person that may have been mentioned or discussed during the current presentation, discussion or follow-up Q & A session.

For More Information/Questions: Visit: [www.blueskyhearing.com](http://www.blueskyhearing.com)

Email: [info@blueskyhearing.com](mailto:info@blueskyhearing.com) Call: 510-540-9000

~ Kathy Fairbanks

## **Consider joining our national organization, Hearing Loss Association of America!**

It's easy! Just go online to [hearingloss.org](http://hearingloss.org). Under the Get Involved tab, select Membership. There is more information at that page about membership. The minimum to join is \$1, however, if you donate \$45 (or more) you can opt to receive the “Hearing Life” magazine either by e-mail or a print copy in the mail. You can enjoy receiving the print copy and being able to browse the content. The Fall/Winter 2025 issue included good articles on:

- Auracast, a new way to listen in public spaces
- Information about co-existing Assistive Listening Systems
- Tips to help you get a job and having success on the job
- Nancy Rubin and her Sound Advice project
- Boston member, Brad McKenna, shared his hearing loss journey and starting a production company for videos, video clips, and blog posts.
- How HLAA has helped veterans
- Tips for air travel with hearing loss
- How a professor was able to develop assistive listening technology to improve the classroom experience.
- Pictures and info from 2025 Walk for Hearing and the 2025 HLAA Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Plus, lots of good information is available on the HLAA website which you can access at any time.

**Time to renew your membership to our chapter! Only \$25.**

**Bring a check to the next meeting or go to**

**[hearinglosseb.org/join](http://hearinglosseb.org/join)**

**We need your help! Can you volunteer? Contact us at: [info@hearinglosseb.org](mailto:info@hearinglosseb.org)**

Here is a list of volunteer positions we are seeking to fill:

- **Volunteer Recruiter**: Contact people who said they could volunteer and tell them about volunteer needs. Recruit for those positions.
- **YouTube Channel Creator**: Establish a chapter YouTube channel for meeting recordings.
- **Webmaster**: Maintain and improve the chapter website. Currently developed using the Wix platform.
- **Just want to help?** All of our committees need helpers! All volunteers are welcome! Contact us and we'll help you figure out what would be a good fit for you.

### ***HLAA SF/East Bay Leaders***

#### **The Board of Directors:**

Contact us at: [info@hearinglosseb.org](mailto:info@hearinglosseb.org)

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#### ***JOIN HEARING LOSS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA (HLAA) – THEY ADVOCATE FOR YOU!***

[hearingloss.org](http://hearingloss.org) Membership is now open to all of our valued supporters who help fuel our mission and change the lives of people with hearing loss. **Everyone who gives is now an HLAA member, helping to amplify our HLAA voice, and fulfill our important mission— together!**

**COST OF MEMBERSHIP:** The HLAA national office had consolidated the donation and membership processes. Presently, anyone who donates as little as \$1 would become a member of the national HLAA. Additionally, with a donation of \$45 annually, individuals have the option to receive a hard copy of the Hearing Life magazine from the national office.