



Government of Bermuda

Ministry of Youth, Social Development and Seniors

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

by

The Hon. Tineé Furbert, JP, MP

Pilot Hearing Support Program

Friday, 29th May 2026

Good morning, Mr. Speaker,

I stand before this Honorable House to announce the Pilot Hearing Support Program.

Hearing is fundamental to how we experience the world. It allows us to connect with others, engage in our communities, and maintain our overall well-being. According to the World Health Organization, more than 1.5 billion people worldwide experience some degree of hearing loss. Hearing loss is defined as the inability to hear as well as someone with normal hearing—typically measured as thresholds of 20 decibels or better in both ears—and can range from mild to profound, affecting one or both ears.

Mr. Speaker, hearing loss can occur at any stage of life. However, it is particularly prevalent among older adults. The World Health

Organization estimated in 2019 that over 65 per cent of adults aged 60 and older experience hearing loss. In fact, age-related hearing loss is one of the leading causes of *years lived with disability* globally, and the leading cause among adults over the age of 70.

Mr. Speaker,

Census data, based on self-reporting, often underestimates mild or moderate hearing loss. In 2010, 814 people in Bermuda reported hearing difficulties or complete deafness—775 with difficulties (95.2%) and 39 with complete deafness (4.8%). Of these, 209 (25.7%) said their condition was disabling. Most cases (57.5%) were among those aged 65+, and women comprised nearly 57% of disabling cases. Age-group analysis shows hearing difficulties affect all adults, not just seniors. Hearing loss rates were similar across racial groups. However, this information is outdated, highlighting the need for updated data to reflect current trends and practices. We look forward to updated information following the completion of the 2026 Census, which will support the planning and ongoing development of this programme.

Mr. Speaker,

The impact of hearing loss extends well beyond physical health. It can significantly affect quality of life. Among older adults, untreated

hearing loss is strongly associated with social isolation and loneliness. When individuals struggle to hear and participate in conversations, they may begin to withdraw from social situations. Research shows that those who experience hearing loss and do not use hearing aids report higher levels of loneliness, increased rates of depression, and an overall lower quality of life.

Emerging research also highlights a connection between hearing loss and cognitive decline. The Lancet Commission on Dementia Prevention identified hearing loss as a modifiable risk factor for dementia, particularly when addressed in mid-life. While causation has not been definitively established, reduced auditory input may contribute to decreased cognitive stimulation over time, in addition to social isolation - another risk factor for dementia. The Commission recommends that hearing loss be addressed across the life course through both public health strategies and individual action.

Mr. Speaker, while the Department of Financial Assistance provides essential support to our community, including coverage for standard hearing aids, gaps remain. Financial assistance clients and persons with private or public insurance may still face co-payments for hearing tests, which can discourage uptake. In addition, hearing tests and hearing devices are not covered under the current Future Care and HIP plans. Future Care is the largest insurer of seniors on the

island. As a result, many individuals continue to face financial barriers to accessing essential hearing care.

It is in response to the growing body of international evidence and current system gaps that the Ministry of Youth, Social Development and Seniors have commissioned a pilot hearing support benefit program. Through a targeted grant administered by Age Concern, the Ministry will provide support towards the cost of hearing assessments and hearing devices for adults in financial need who are uninsured or underinsured. The programme launched in early May, and applications are available.

Adults requiring support for hearing tests or hearing aids may make application for this benefit program. Applications will be available from Age Concern and hearing service providers. All applications will be submitted to Age Concern who will assess applicants aged 50 and older, while applications for individuals under 50 will be sent to Ageing and Disability Services for review.

This initiative is designed both to respond to current gaps and to build a clearer understanding of demand, helping to inform sustainable, long-term solutions. The Ministry of Health is advancing significant work through health reform and universal coverage. Accordingly, this pilot will provide targeted support now while contributing valuable insight for Health's broader system development efforts.

Mr. Speaker, our government is committed to ensuring that people with disabilities, including those experiencing hearing loss, have access to the support and services they need to live healthy and connected lives. We also recognize the importance of prevention, particularly as it relates to reducing the risk of dementia within our community.

We encourage all individuals to protect their hearing and to seek assessment and support as early as possible and make application to the hearing support program if needed.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker