Dining out can be an aggravating experience for someone who is hard of hearing. But there are things restaurants can do to help change that. One such method is to provide training to the employees who interact with customers on a regular basis.

The Hearing and Speech Agency has started offering free training for restaurants interested in learning those strategies.

Seating someone in a booth rather than a table and being sure to look patrons in the face are among the suggestions offered by the Baltimore-based nonprofit, which officially launched the training early this year.

“We have been able to leverage some of the relationships that we have with Baltimore restaurants to expand our reach,” said Executive Director Erin Stauder. “One of our first partners was La Cuchara. And their staff had such a positive experience that they connected us with other restaurants.”

**Why did you all start this training?** It happened very naturally and organically. Many people had been telling us that they were avoiding certain restaurants or avoiding going out to eat altogether because they felt the experience was more frustrating than enjoyable. And when we thought about it we realized it made a lot of sense because restaurants are busy and loud. And if someone were hard of hearing it would be really difficult for them to go and participate and have a meaningful conversation. Because HASA is all about inclusivity and expanding access and communication for everyone, we really felt that those individuals were being excluded from the vibrant restaurant scene and needed a resource in order to be able to connect with that community.

So we just started talking to restaurants in the area and realized that restaurants weren’t actively thinking about this but were interested in learning more. It has been a very successful partnership with many of the restaurants so far. **Baltimore Restaurant Week was running in January** and that was a good tool to drive the buzz and awareness.
Is there one thing all restaurateurs should fix now? There’s not one silver bullet that is going to work for all restaurants and for all environments. Except for training staff – whether it’s wait staff, manager, owner — in being comfortable talking about inclusivity, especially as it relates to individuals who are hard of hearing. For example, looking at the reservation system and having OpenTable or any online reservation system, ask if anybody in the dining party requires special accommodation.

What’s the No. 1 concern restaurant owners or managers have when it comes to tackling this issue? The biggest concern relates to that fear of asking the question. People are afraid of offending folks and making assumptions. And we at HASA are saying, “Don’t be afraid to ask the question of all of your patrons.” Because [among] people who are hard of hearing and who have hearing challenges, it’s an invisible disability. So you cannot make assumptions based on age or gender or race that somebody is going to be facing this challenge. And we have to be comfortable asking all patrons and allowing all patrons the opportunity to advocate for themselves.

You suggest restaurants provide a visual representation of specials instead of just reading them. But from a time and logistics standpoint that may sound easier than it is. How can they make that work? Something that impresses me about many of the high-end restaurants in Baltimore is that they are concerned about their branding and presentation and they want the specials to be beautifully presented if they are going to be written down for their guests. What we’re saying is that if you have an individual who is hard of hearing, you don’t have to do all that stuff. If you can just write down the specials even if it’s on a piece of paper and hand it to them? You are going to limit any communication breakdowns that are going to occur. We would advocate for a restaurant developing their special list maybe earlier in the week to allow them time to put the specials on a beautifully written piece of paper. But in the heat of the moment if an individual is hard of hearing and needs that information, going back to the low-tech system of pen and paper is definitely an OK way, from our perspective, to provide that information. It doesn’t need to be time consuming or expensive.

Are current architectural and design trends at odds with what you are trying to accomplish? I think that the trend of very industrial restaurants with beautiful exposed brick and exposed beams and a lot of wood and metal is at odds with having a very successful communication exchange. Restaurants that participate in our training learn about what they can do with seating arrangements and positioning to make sure individuals who are hard of hearing can enjoy the industrial exposed brick experience while still being able to communicate effectively with their dining partners.

Are the restaurants reaching out to you recognizing the economic impact of patrons who are, as you mentioned before, avoiding restaurants? I think so. The hard-of-hearing community in Baltimore is very politically and socially active. And when a restaurant is able to survey their market and realize that they are missing a portion of the population? From both an economic and social justice perspective, it’s important for all groups to be included.