

Hearing ‘aid’ for Ukraine

BY ZOE FAWCETT-EUSTACE AND YEHOR KAPUSTYNSKYI

Hearing Aid Recycling (HAR) has partnered with Ukraine’s Vidchui organisation to deliver 1000 hearing aids to those affected by war. This collaboration provides essential support for military personnel and civilians suffering from hearing loss, highlighting the power of global solidarity in times of crisis.



Fenella from HAR and Tony handing over the box of hearing aids destined for Ukraine.



Audiologist Elona with ‘the box’ of hearing aids at the warehouse in Kyiv.

Hearing Aid Recycling (HAR) has been honoured to be able to play a small part in supporting the people of Ukraine. Working together, we (Zoe, Co-founder of HAR, and Yegor of Vidchui) have, in the last few months of 2024, helped 1000 people with free hearing aids, marking the beginning of a hopefully long and fruitful partnership.

Zoe Fawcett-Eustace (ZFE): In the early days of Hearing Aid Recycling, I was trying to drum up support to raise awareness about the organisation. One of the first people I spoke to was Peter Bullick of blues band, Bonham Bullick. He was delighted to help. Peter grew up in Ireland during the troubles; he remembered people “literally having their ears drums blown out”. Hearing damage is an often overlooked consequence of war.

“Providing people with hearing aids has become one of our most significant challenges – and one of our most important missions”

Yehor Kapustynskyi (YK): With the outbreak of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, access to basic healthcare was drastically reduced. Loud explosions, limited access to hygiene, overcrowded hospitals and an ongoing economic crisis have all taken a toll on hearing healthcare. With altered realities and different priorities, healthcare for most Ukrainians has understandably slipped down the list.

Since 2022, the Ukrainian military has grown significantly, increasing from 261,000 personnel in 2021 to approximately 1,000,000 today. This expansion has led to the rise in the number of people experiencing hearing problems due to trauma sustained in combat or in areas close to conflict zones. As a result, many more people need hearing specialists and care in Ukraine at this time.

‘Vidchui’, which translates to ‘feel’ in Ukrainian, has supported people with hearing issues for over 11 years. Since 2022, however, much of our work has shifted to address the consequences of war. Providing people with hearing aids has become one of our most significant challenges – and one of our most important missions.

Ukraine government policy changed in 2024, enabling people to apply for state

help with the provision of free hearing aids. While both government programmes and civil organisations in Ukraine are doing their best to meet this growing need, the demand is at least 10 times greater than the anticipated governmental supply. Resources are severely affected by the huge spending requirements to fund the war effort.

Thankfully, we are not alone in this effort. Our friends and partners in the UK have been among the first to step in and help. A man named Tony, who has been helping Ukraine for many years, recommended that I approach Zoe – the head of HAR in the UK.

ZFE: HAR regularly receives hearing aids from all over the UK via private and NHS audiologists, hearing departments and people who no longer need their hearing aids. We support hearing initiatives all over the world, including Pakistan, Malawi, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Kenya, to name a few. The first enquiry for Ukraine was for a single hearing aid for a serviceman named Andrii. This request was quickly followed by several others, including one for a small child, and then a general plea for help. It was from that first call that the partnership between HAR, Zoe, Tony, Yegor and Vidchui was formed. It’s often difficult to navigate the complexities of African import / export rules and charges

GLOBAL HEALTH

but transporting to an active warzone adds a whole new layer. In order to guarantee that the hearing aids will get to and benefit the right people, it's important to make sure they are accounted for every step of the way.

Every hearing aid which arrives at HAR, destined to help overseas, is given the once-over and cleaned. They are then batched by the manufacturer (for ease of programming and software requirements at the other end), packed and despatched. In the case of the first shipment of 1000 hearing aids, including the ones specifically pre-programmed for Andrii, they were hand-delivered in a small yellow box on a freezing cold and soaking wet December morning to a barn in Hampshire. It was humbling to see the level of support from the medical industry and the commitment of people helping to store, organise, load and then drive vans all the way to Ukraine.

YK: On 15 December 2024, the hearing aids arrived here in Kyiv. It was one of the first snowy days of the year! Three of us from Vidchui, two project managers and a driver, went to meet the van, ready to receive the much-anticipated shipment. At nine in the morning, the sun was yet to fully rise but two vans with huge, brightly painted Ukrainian and British flags were already there with the early light reflecting off them. I approached one of the drivers – John from Liverpool – who had travelled all the way from the British Isles, bringing essential supplies for hospitals in Ukraine.

We quickly realised that our long-awaited box, containing the first 1000 hearing aids (generously donated by people in the UK), was buried somewhere among more boxes, crutches, wheelchairs and other much-needed goods in those fully-loaded vans. We volunteered to help unload everything into the warehouse and finally found our box! I couldn't believe that 1000 hearing aids could fit into such a small package, but there they were – 1000 little pieces of hope for so many people.

NGO Vidchui is the largest non-governmental organisation in Ukraine dedicated to supporting people with hearing loss. We operate a rehabilitation centre

for children aged zero to seven, providing support programmes for them and their families. We work with veterans and military personnel by supplying earplugs and hearing aids for those affected by acoustic trauma. Additionally, we run a mobile audiometry clinic that tours liberated and close to frontline areas, offering hearing tests to those with limited access to healthcare.

We also have two branches in military rehabilitation centres in Lviv: the 'Superhumans' and 'Unbroken' clinics. Soldiers from all over Ukraine come to these facilities for emergency and rehabilitation treatment: getting supplies to these was our priority. We immediately sent 150 units to each one, enabling soldiers affected by war-related hearing loss to get hearing aids programmed by our audiology specialists. You can imagine the relief this brings to the families of injured soldiers. Among all their struggles, they can at least take comfort in knowing that this expensive yet essential equipment is covered.

ZFE: It's been a complete pleasure to meet Yegor and hear of his positive experience when he stayed in Worcestershire. His determination to help his country in these terrible times is both humbling and inspiring. It goes without saying it would have been better to have met under different circumstances. I hope that peace will return to Ukraine soon and that they will be able to begin the process of rebuilding their lives and country.

YK: We are working every day to protect, rebuild, and strengthen our country all at once. Our inner resilience drives this effort, but it would not be possible without the support of generous and kind people worldwide. We're so happy to partner with HAR and look forward to sharing the stories of those whose lives have been impacted by the donated hearing aids. Trust me – every contribution makes a huge difference.

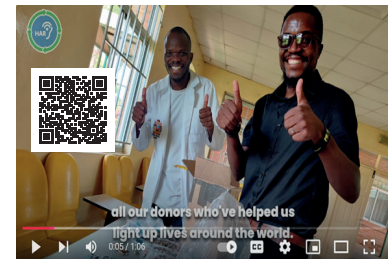
ZFE: We are so grateful to everyone who donates hearing aids they no longer require to help others in need around the world. If you would like to help us 'help others hear', please do get in touch with us.

www.hearingaidrecycling.co.uk



The box of hearing aids arriving in Kyiv.

To hear about the ways in which HAR is transforming lives, scan these QR codes:



Abel and Godfrey's stories.



Clement's story.

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