AT Key Newsletter
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Assistive Technology & Local Government

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Local government and community organizations are often the focal points of life in rural communities. People with disabilities frequently face barriers to local participation, particularly in sparsely populated communities with minimal infrastructure. Assistive technology solutions have the potential to reduce those barriers and increase citizen involvement.

Barrier reduction and inclusion can be complicated. For example, the city council may hold its meetings in an accessible room, but may not have made provisions for the agenda to be printed in an alternative format, such as large print or Braille for the citizen with low vision. The local library may have books in alternative format to check out, but no text telephone at the reference desk to communicate with an individual with a hearing impairment, or reacher available for someone in a wheelchair to select their own books from the shelves. The local school board may have used large print for their agenda, but did not utilize a public amplification system needed for the citizen with limited hearing to hear and participate in the discussion.

The reality is there are a wide variety of disabilities and an even wider variety of needs. Each disability affects individuals in different ways and requires different types of accommodations. It is not necessary to have every accommodation for every type of need available. It is important, however, for government entities to make citizens aware of their willingness to provide accommodations. This can be done easily within meeting publications and/or notifications. Individuals with disabilities also have a responsibility to let their officials know of their needs so that accommodations can be provided. An informed public entity can often find inexpensive solutions if given information regarding the need and the time to plan ahead.

Officials have a legal and ethical responsibility to provide access to local government. Everyone wins when all can participate. If you need ideas or technical assistance on ways to make your local government activities accessible, talk to your consumers with varying needs and/or call IPAT.

Captions: Open, Closed & Real Time

What are captions, how do they work, who can benefit? Essentially, captions are subtitles, translations of the spoken word to the written,

allowing individuals with hearing loss to see what they cannot hear. Captions can be either open or closed. Open captions always appear on the screen, while closed captions must be opened to be seen. To open the closed caption, a viewer needs a TeleCaption decoder or a television with the built-in chip. The viewer just selects the closed caption option found in the video portion of their televisions menu system. There is no special service to subscribe to or fee to pay in order to receive captions.

The Television Decoder Circuitry Act of 1990 requires television manufacturers to build-in caption decoder circuitry on all sets larger that thirteen inches. This law took effect July 1, 1993, and has directly benefited twenty-four million Americans with hearing impairments. Captions themselves are easily visible white letters against a black background, placed on the television screen so that they do not obstruct relevant parts of the picture.

In 1982, the National Captioning Institute (NCI) developed real time captioning. This process allows any live broadcast, such as the news or sporting events, to be closed captioned as they are telecast. Real time captioning uses court reporters who type up to 250 word per minute, giving viewers who are hearing impaired access to most live broadcasts. Publications listing television programs use the universal symbol for closed captioning to indicate if a program is closed captioned or not. This symbol is two capital CCs surrounded by a symbol of a television set. This same symbol can also be found on video rentals and denotes closed captioning capabilities.

If hearing loss interferes with your enjoyment of television, try activating the closed caption option as a possible assistive technology solution. Check out the user's manual that came with your television set for specific instructions.

Funding Assistive Technology Through Medicare

A person who qualifies for Medicare may receive benefits through Part A and/or Part B coverage. Medicare's term for assistive technology is durable medical equipment (DME). Part B Medicare pays for the purchase or rental of DME devices and for services such as maintenance and repair. Part B requires a monthly premium and an annual deductible.

Medicare, however, pays for only 80% of what it determines to be the 'allowable cost' of the equipment. The out-of-pocket expense to the consumer depends on whether or not the supplier agrees to accept the Medicare 'allowable' as payment in full or 'accepts assignment'. If the supplier 'accepts assignment' and you have met the annual deductible, then you (or your co-pay insurance) are only responsible for 20% of the

'allowable' charge. Medicare pays the same amount (80% of the 'allowable' cost) whether or not the supplier 'accepts assignment'.

Suppliers can and do bill Medicare without 'accepting assignment', and may then hold the beneficiary responsible for a large balance. To minimize your costs it is important to select an equipment supplier who is known to 'accept assignment'. If a supplier does not 'accept assignment,' the buyer could pay much more because the supplier is then free to charge a higher cost for the device.

CONSUMER CONNECTION

Tools for Individuals with Learning Disabilities

Recent advances in assistive technology (AT) have much to offer individuals with learning disabilities in the areas of reading and writing. A learning disability is not something an individual gets over and reading and writing are not tasks only required in school. Consequently, the need for the use of AT to compensate for performance difficulties becomes obvious.

For those with reading problems, the computer can be an invaluable tool. With the addition of software and a few peripherals, it can read books, magazines, newspaper articles and a variety of materials generated via word processor or typewriter. Although computerized reading systems have been available for many years, recent improvements have made them faster, smaller and more accurate. They are here, user-friendly and affordable.

Written expression is the most difficult of human tasks. Due to its complexity, a variety of AT solutions are available to assist the individual with learning disabilities produce viable documents. For example, persons with dysgraphia can write using a computer-based word processing program. This tool releases them from the mechanics of writing and allows them to redirect efforts toward the meaning of the writing. It takes penmanship out of the writing process.

Individuals with severe spelling problems can functionally compensate using spell-checkers and on-line thesauruses which come bundled with most word processing programs. As well, word prediction and/or abbreviation expansion software can be added offering correct spelling options based on letter(s) typed. These AT solutions increase both

speed and accuracy of input for those with spelling difficulties and have been shown to improve spelling skills.

Another AT writing solution is organizational software. These programs help users plan what they will write through outlining and concept mapping activities. The individual inputs ideas freely and then utilizes the software to assist in sequence and logical idea flow.

Open Sesame

One of the most difficult movements you can make is to reach forward, grasp something and turned your wrist. It is no wonder that handling a house or car key can be troublesome. If you have difficulty grasping a key, try a homemade key holder made from materials purchased at a craft shop.

Holder No. 1

Make a simple key holder by patting two balls of compound (i.e., Sculpey III, Fimo, or similar product) into flat circle's. Sandwich the head of the key between the circles and squeeze gently to seal. Make a the hole for the key chain. Bake according to compound directions. When finished, decorate as desired.

Holder No. 2

Purchase Friendly Plastic. Cut two small rectangles (approximately 1" x 3") with scissors. Sandwich the head of the key between the rectangles. Bake for about that two minutes. The plastic pieces will melt together. Drill a hole for the key chain once the plastic is cool.

Adapted from:" You Need Things to Make, to Make Things Easy".

EQUIPMENT SPOTLIGHT

The ChatBox is a portable speech output communication device having a number of unique features. They include: 16 message keys, three minutes of recorded speech, lights to predict which of the keys contain messages, four levels and/or two-key sequencing on any level, a key guard, Minispeak vocabulary options, and direct selection or single switch access. This newly available device helps to develop language and vocabulary which will transfer directly to more advanced systems such as the Alpha Talker or Delta Talker. The **ChatBox** is available for free trial use through the IPAT Equipment Loan Library and may be purchased from

Saltillo Corporation, 330-674-6722. Base cost is $495.

Mark Your Calendar

Web-based Workshop
"Science for All"
April 31-May 5, 1998
for K-8 teachers
http://www.edc.org/FSC/NCIP/Science/

Classroom Computer Modifications
April 23, 1998
Sherwood, ND
Mark Coppin
800-568-5175

Head Start's National Conference
April 29-May 2, 1998
Holiday Inn
Fargo, ND
701-777-2663

IPAT Equipment Expo
April 23, Maddock, ND
May 6-8, Bismarck, ND
June 10-11, Bismarck, ND
Mike Bishop
800-265-IPAT