

# A PICTURE OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY USE IN NORTH DAKOTA

*Assistive Technology makes things possible*



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This is a publication developed by the North Dakota Interagency Program for Assistive Technology (IPAT), whose charge is to support North Dakota residents with disabilities, including those experiencing the effects of aging, who need assistive technology devices and/or services.

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## **A Picture of Assistive Technology Use in North Dakota**

*Assistive Technology makes things possible*

### **What is Assistive Technology?**

Today, technology makes all lives easier, however, for people with disabilities, assistive technology (AT) makes things possible. AT plays a powerful role in maximizing the independence of individuals with disabilities and those changed by the aging process. AT solutions provide opportunities for individuals to learn, compete, work and interact with family and friends.

An **assistive technology device** is any item, piece of equipment, or product that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the performance of people with disabilities.

An **assistive technology service** is any service that directly assists a person with a disability in selecting, obtaining or using an assistive technology device.

### **Why Assistive Technology?**

Recognizing the potential benefits of Assistive Technology for people with disabilities, Congress enacted the Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1988 (commonly referred to as the Tech Act), as amended in 1994.

Congress enacted the Tech Act to address the needs for and barriers to assistive technology identified by persons with disabilities, their families, providers and advocates – including those individuals experiencing the effects of aging. Identified Assistive Technology needs include:

- “Information about the availability and potential of assistive technology”
- “Access to trained personnel to assist individuals to use such devices and services”
- “Timely acquisition and delivery to assistive technology particularly with respect to children”
- “Outreach to rural and underserved persons”
- “Coordination among and between state and private entities, particularly with respect to the transitions of individuals”
- “Resources to pay for devices and services, (e.g. consistency in decision making regarding insurance, Medicaid, Medicare, school districts, etc. coverage policies)”
- \*Assurance the state has the capacity to provide necessary technology related assistance”
- “Access to existing telecommunications and information technologies”

## What is IPAT?

The Interagency Program for Assistive Technology (IPAT) is North Dakota's Tech Act project. In 1993, the ND Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Human Services was awarded a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) to develop North Dakota's Tech Act. From the beginning, IPAT has led the state in developing strategies that reflect the Tech Act's goal of improving access, consistency, continuity, quality assurance and cost-effective approaches to obtain assistive technology devices and services.

## Who Need Assistive Technology?

*People who have been injured in accidents need Assistive Technology.*

Wes Archer was a farmer who was critically injured when his car hit a patch of ice on I-29. His spinal cord was severed in the accident and Wes became quadriplegic.

"I couldn't envision anything that I could ever do that would ever be helped by anybody. I knew I was going to be a gigantic drag on the whole family. I couldn't even come up with a way of killing myself," Wes remembers. For many years Wes depended on other to do virtually everything for him. It was through the introduction of Assistive Technology and IPAT that he began to gain control over his environment and his life. By sipping and puffing on a straw-switch used to activate his environmental control system (ECS) he can turn on the TV, change the channels, and adjust the volume. His ECS also allows him to signal his aid by turning on a radio if he needs something. He can control the lights, the fan, the stereo and telephone. "The AT which allows me to call out and answer the phone is the 'piece de resistance' which makes a big difference in my being alone and immobile here."

In 1963, a stray pitch changed Fay Weatherly's future forever. He was struck in the head, the batting helmet forced into his skull. It has been a long road to recovery. Even now Fay grins and says with the help of Assistive Technology he is "still recovering."

*People who are impacted by disease, both sudden and chronic, need Assistive Technology*

Joey Tehle is an attractive, vibrant young woman with no voice. She communicates in 'normal conversation' by patiently typing out her words letter-by-letter on a device called a Canon Communicator. Her words are recorded on paper streamers which she tears off and hands you to read.

"I just got sick one day and within a week, my life changed. I still went to junior high, spent most of the summer in hospitals and had therapy during school and after," she explains.

With the help of Assistive Technology Joey completed a technical degree in business and has worked as a secretary and dispatcher. A Text Telephone (TT) and an augmentative communication device help her 'talk' at work. Without Assistive Technology Joey's life would be significantly different.

For nineteen years Bob Puyear taught physics at North Dakota State University. For most of those years he traveled about campus on foot. Toward the end of his tenure, his Multiple Sclerosis (MS) required him to use a wheelchair or scooter to get about.

Bob has very limited use of his hands. In order to remain an effective computer-user, he uses voice-recognition software. He is quick to point out that, while he uses this Assistive Technology software solution because of his MS, his son uses the same software because he works in an office environment where there are not enough secretaries.

Not all of Bob's Assistive Technology is so high tech. He wears a ballpoint pen on a lanyard around his neck so it is easily accessible. He sips his coffee through a straw in a large insulated cup. A sticky mat on the table helps hold his cup steady. Through the use of a range of AT he remains a valuable member of the community and an advocate for those with disabilities.

### ***People dealing with the effects of aging need Assistive Technology.***

We all expect changes in our abilities as we grow older, though some may be more debilitating than others. As the vision in Nora Haugen's left eye grew progressively worse, she was able to compensate with her strong right eye. But that all came to an end, the day she woke up legally blind.

It was then that family and friends with the help of Assistive Technology pitched in to help her remain in her home. An outreach worker labeled her stove and washer and dryer so her fingers could 'read the knobs.' Service providers helped her find a telephone and calculator with larger-than-normal buttons. Her granddaughter helped her organize her papers into plastic tubs with large print labels. She requested special over-sized check blanks from her local bank which has raised lines allowing her to 'feel' where to write. For her eightieth birthday she received a CCTV – a camera that projects reading material on to a large screen. With enough magnification she can read the paper and her mail, pay her bills, work crossword puzzles and even figure out where she is in her crochet pattern. "You don't have to be stuck or helpless," Nora says. And with the use of Assistive Technology, she isn't.

Lieutenant Governor Rosemarie Myrdal grew up with 'creative' Assistive Technology. Her father Harry Lohse, had arthritis, which eventually restricted him to a wheelchair. As state chair of the Agriculture Adjustment Administration in the forties, he visited every country courthouse, and was made painfully aware of all the stairs to be climbed to reach meeting rooms.

At home, his children helped him during the summers by running the cattle past his car where he sat evaluating the livestock. In his later years he built a ramp up to the door of his house so that he could move from his car to his wheelchair to his doorway without having to negotiate stairs. The inside of his house was an array of rolling carts and shelves with hooks so that he could either pull things to him or pull himself to them. He loved to build reachers and grabbers – and had to because there were no resources to help him.

Now, due to advances in technology, legislation and growing awareness, resources do exist that can help North Dakotans like Harry Lohse obtain the Assistive Technology they need.

### ***People who are born with disabilities need Assistive Technology.***

From the time Amber Vollmer was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of six months, her parents Cindy and Jim have worked to include her in all the family activities. Assistive Technology has been the key to her participation and the devices used have run the gamut.

“We have used all sorts of gadgets, some bought, some home made,” her mother Cindy explains. “We used what was designed as a wrap-around bath seat so she could sit in the sand with the other kids. We built a swing-set frame that we took to the lake so Amber could play in the water when the other kids did. We even adapted a toboggan so she could go out for recess.” It is Assistive Technology that allows Amber to be a participant in daily life rather than an observer of life going by.

#### **How are Assistive Technology Needs Identified?**

***“...consumers have to be willing to make waves, criticize programs and ask for their AT needs to be met. We lack strong advocacy coalition in the state.”***

***“...we need to learn about self-advocacy and self-assertiveness. We continue to be dependent on others to meet our needs. We need information so we can meet our own needs.”***

#### ***AT Public Forum Comments***

Consumer involvement constitutes a primary component in identifying needs and systemic barriers to Assistive Technology access in North Dakota. Public forums, statewide surveys, ongoing personal contacts with regional coordinators, and frequent meetings of the IPAT Consumer Advisory Committee ensure consumer involvement from the start of planning initiatives, through program design, implementation and evaluation.

***“Assistive Technology is so important psychologically for people with disabilities because it’s a means of escaping temporarily that constant stressor (the disability). It’s a means for that person to escape from themselves and to really be what they want to be.”***  
***Pam Kennedy***  
***Young adult with a disability***

- AT Public Forum comments from 155 individuals with disabilities, people experiencing the effects of aging, service providers and members of the general public provide project direction.
- Statewide surveys conducted in the areas of special education, vocational rehabilitation, and assistive technology assessment provision reveal barriers to Assistive Technology experienced by service providers.
- The Assistive Technology Info-Line is used by consumers to identify needs they have in obtaining Assistive Technology devices and services through a simple toll-free phone call. Approximately 500 calls are received at the AT Info-Line annually.
- The IPAT Consumer Advisory Committee (CAC) membership and their links to existing networks and support systems provide valuable information used in ongoing barrier identification. The membership of the CAC is comprised of one hundred percent primary and secondary consumers and reflects the state's diversity of disabilities, ages, regions, and cultures.
- The IPAT Regional Coordinators field over 3,000 calls per year identifying needs for Assistive Technology training, equipment and technical assistance. The needs are unique to each of the four regions and provide a local point of contact for AT device and service input.

## **IPAT Effects Changes Through Policy and Practice**

*“...no one is given the responsibility for AT in any setting (schools, workplaces, hospitals) so it never gets done. It is always being ‘looked into,’ there is no accountability.”*

### ***AT Public Forum Comments***

Through collaboration with other agencies and entities, barriers that prevent North Dakotans from acquiring Assistive Technology have been minimized. Development of collaborative relationships among private entities, consumers, state agencies, providers, and Tech Act projects encourages ongoing, interactive partnerships that improve current service delivery systems, avoiding duplication of services and retrofitting.

IPAT has been involved in numerous activities designed to address systems change in North Dakota. The overall goals are to expand access to Assistive Technology devices and services, improve funding sources, and increase timelines of Assistive Technology provision.

- A model policy for funding communication devices through Medicaid has been adopted which clarifies Assistive Technology coverage and broadens benefits

for citizens with disabilities. A similar model policy is being developed for Medicare.

- The Assistive Technology Financial Loan Program has been initiated that provides personal loans to individuals for the purchase of Assistive Technology.
- The CAC initiated an Assistive Technology Warranty Law (lemon law) whose successful passage now requires manufacturers to repair, replace, or refund the money for AT equipment that is not usable due to manufacturing defects.

***“A warranty law like this would have helped us when we had a defective scooter. We took it back eight times in less than a year. My husband wasn’t able to get around while it was being repaired, and the trips to town to deliver and pick it up were expensive. We were at the mercy of the vendor and they didn’t appear to care. Now we have some power.”***

### ***KEYS Conference Participant***

- IPAT has coordinated the development of a statewide coalition, Partners for Assistive Technology, comprised on 19 representatives from public and private entities and persons with disabilities to identify and collaborate in the reduction of AT barriers.
- The state VR office and IPAT, supported by existing policies defining AT responsibilities, are working together to establish consistency in regional practices.
- Additionally, through cooperative efforts with IPAT, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, Division of Special Education has developed Assistive Technology guidelines which clarify and modify school district practices and procedures for providing Assistive Technology.

Josh Coverstone is a bright young man with albinism, which affects one in every 250,000 people. His vision is severely impaired and a laptop computer with magnified word processing software has been identified as an accommodation for his disability. An additional software program reads back what he has typed, helping him with spelling and punctuation.

The law states that the provision of the technology required to provide him educational benefit is the responsibility of the school. Unfortunately, differences in the interpretation of school responsibility and breakdowns in the processes involved resulted in a significant delay in obtaining the AT devices and services necessary to help Josh perform successfully in school.

The Assistive Technology guidelines which now have been developed are a valuable resource which enable others to obtain necessary AT devices and services they need without conflict and in a timely manner.

## Information

*“...Professionals, case managers, the general public, and consumer lack overall awareness about what [assistive technology] is even available, let alone the knowledge about where to go for specific information.”*

### *AT Public Forum Comments*

Limited awareness of Assistive Technology potential, devices and services is not restricted to those individuals in remote and isolated areas. Although Assistive Technology is a mandated component within numerous federal and state statutes, the need for information regarding what AT is, who needs it, and how to access it remains a statewide issue.

*“...we need a policy regarding the transfer of Assistive Technology during transition periods and between home and school.”*

*“...we spend too much money and time in pursuit of a diagnosis and too little time and money dealing with the Assistive Technology needs that the diagnosis ultimately clarifies.”*

*“...without policy to direct the inclusion of AT in the assessment and IEP processes, regional practices are inconsistent.”*

*AT Public Forum Comments  
Survey Comments*

Currently, too many senior citizens, employers, consumers and professional personnel lack information about Assistive Technology options. Consequently, IPAT has instituted a statewide multi-media Assistive Technology information campaign. Resource materials are developed in response to consumer and service provider requests and include:

- Brochures on the IPAT project, Selecting & Obtaining Assistive Technology, the AT Lemon Law and AT Funding via Medicaid of North Dakota.
- A video resource library consisting of 126 titles covering the spectrum of Assistive Technology devices and services.
- A booklet, Doodads, Gadgets, & Thingamajigs was designed specifically to introduce Assistive Technology to senior citizens.
- A Guide to Policy and Funding for Assistive Technology in North Dakota was developed and over 200 have been disseminated statewide.
- Over 150 AT Key Fact Sheets have been developed and serve as a quick reference on a variety of AT device and services topics.

- A Website for resource dissemination and current Assistive Technology information  
<http://www.ndipat.org>.
- A bi-monthly newsletter, the AT Key to a readership of nearly 2,000.

***“Keep the AT Key newsletter coming, it is a great source of information. It is always interesting, current and covers a broad range of Assistive Technology information.”***

***AT Public Forum Comments***

### **Training and Technical Assistance**

Craig Fahlstrom is a small grains farmer in Western North Dakota. In 1993, he spent fourteen weeks in the Ramsey burn unit in St. Paul, and then five months in rehabilitation. He had suffered severe chemical burns to his hands, leaving him with parts of three fingers and a thumb on each hand.

He no longer has the grip strength he had and many of the Assistive Technology devices he uses enhance the grip he does have.

IPAT was able to support his continued involvement in farming by sending him to a conference in Indiana. This was one way to decrease his isolation as a resident with a newly acquired disability in a very rural county in North Dakota. While at the conference, Craig was able to talk to other farmers with disabilities, share ideas for adaptations and discover links to AT vendors with products appropriate to farming needs. He is now able to serve as a resource for others in North Dakota needing Assistive Technology solutions on the farm.

***“ see the need for training to understand the interface of Assistive Technology and educational benefit and team function.”***

***AT Public Forum Comments***

IPAT has collaborated with other entities, participated in existing conferences, and sponsored a wide range of local, regional and statewide assistive technology seminars and workshops. As a result of these diverse AT trainings for consumers and service providers, there is an increased awareness and knowledge level of assistive technology issues. To date over 6,517 individuals have participated including: consumers, school staff, health care professionals, VR personnel, case managers and home health care specialists. This increased knowledge level has pushed systems to respond as individuals now know about the assistive technology devices and services they need.

- IPAT developed five AT training modules for use in post-secondary education

pre-service curricula and for inservice of current AT service providers throughout the state.

- IPAT established the AT Info-Line which provides information and referral services specific to AT via a statewide toll-free number.
- Through IPAT's collaboration with the Adaptive Equipment Services, consumers in rural/remote areas of North Dakota receive fabrication and customization services otherwise unavailable to them.
- IPAT is structured to facilitate consumer access to and involvement in the assessment, implementing and evaluation of AT devices and services through placement of regional coordinators in four outreach offices. In response to demands unique to each region, the coordinators field over 3,000 individual AT assistance requests yearly.
- In an effort to meet the need for rural/remote outreach trainings, IPAT contracts with the Anne Carlsen Center. To date they have trained 461 individuals living in rural North Dakota on AT topics identified by each region.

## **Outreach**

The very ruralness of North Dakota is an underlying element in all obstacles facing those residents with disabilities in their quests to gain Assistive Technology devices and services. Isolation is a way of life for 73% of the state's citizens living outside one of the four major cities. Remoteness is magnified by minimal rail, air and bus services. Distance and remoteness are further complicated by harsh, cold winters and hot, dry summers which can make travel dangerous, if not impossible during blizzards and windstorms.

Jesse Heer was diagnosed with mild cerebral palsy when he was in infant in Kansas City. When he was four, he moved to rural North Dakota with his family. he is the only students in his town's public school system who has a physical disability.

The agencies responsible for Jesse's education are working to ensure that he is receiving the Assistive Technology services he needs. Because he lives in a very rural area, both his family and service providers are isolated. The lack of experience and expertise in Assistive Technology sometimes makes them wonder if they know enough to have truly considered Jesse's options.

- The IPAT equipment Loan Library provides all North Dakota residents an opportunity to try a variety of Assistive Technology devices prior to purchase. It averages over 500 loans annually and the request rate continues to grow. The IPAT loan library was developed in direct response to an identified need for such a service and is designed to promote informed Assistive Technology choices by

individuals with disabilities and service providers at little or no cost.

***“IPAT’s loan library is so busy and it is the only option for me. I have found the ‘try before you buy’ idea to be great . . . they need more equipment.”***

***“ the loan library has been great, the use of a trial period really makes sense.”***

### ***AT Public Forum Comments***

- Twenty Assistive Technology outreach kits have been designed by IPAT to enable consumers, seniors, care providers and others an opportunity to provide training and to demonstrate a variety of low-tech devices within their own communities.

The kits have two distinct designs. One focuses on assistive technology for infants and small children, and the other addresses the needs of individuals experiencing the effects of aging. To date, volunteer trainers have shared these kits with people in their homes, county and state fair exhibits, nursing homes and day care facilities.

***“I’ve enjoyed using the IPAT Outreach Kit. I have conducted a program entitled, “Making Living Easier” and the resource kit examples have been a nice addition to the program. Thank you for allowing me to use your resources and share information. Individuals have expressed how helpful the program has been to them.”***  
***Karen Armstrong, County Extension Agent***

- The IPAT Equipment Expo! has provided an opportunity for over 600 individuals to explore simple to complex Assistive Technology devices in their home communities. Senior Citizens, people with disabilities, parents, family members, educators, service providers, advocates and employers have all attended the Equipment Expo!

The Equipment Expo! was developed as a direct result of consumer demand and highlights three areas of Assistive Technology: adapted living aids/environmental control, augmentative communication and adaptive computer access. All communities are encouraged to host an Expo! Securing a site is all that is required, IPAT does the rest.

***“ it was a good learning experience that I will be able to use in my future physical therapy practice.”***

***“ the best part of the Expo! was presenter’s demonstrations of how to use the devices and explanations of the populations each device would be useful for.”***

***“ informative, valuable, appreciate the hands-on practice.”***

### ***Expo! Evaluation Comments***

## Consumers Reflect Their Satisfaction

### Loan Library

*Thank you for the loan of the device through the IPAT Equipment Loan Library. By being able to use your loaner, I was able to see if it was going to work for me instead of going ahead and purchasing something that may not have been what I needed. Since it worked out so well, we have purchased one for my use. I also would like to mention that the speed and efficiency of your office was very impressive. It's so nice to have IPAT, Vocational Rehabilitation and you, the regional coordinator, to help me continue to work at my job (with a lot less pain!). Thank you.*

*Candace Johnson*

### Training Sessions

*Thank you for presenting information to the Protection & Advocacy staff on "Writing AT Solutions into IEPs". The feedback on your session was very good. As a parent myself, I gained a great deal of useful information.*

*VicKay Gross, P&A Advocate, Parent*

### Consumer Stipends

*Thank you so much for the scholarship to attend the seminar. It was a wonder experience and I find myself overwhelmed with dreams, plans, thoughts, etc. surrounding the experience and ways to help our daughter. IPAT really seems to have the foundation to be able to assist so many and I am grateful to know enough of you to assist in spreading the good news. Please maintain me on your mailing lists. I would also be interested in repaying IPAT through assistance where I can provide time, skill, support as able. Once again, thank you for providing me with such a wonderful experience for enrichment, growth, self-help, and family support. You have been one more ray of sunshine on a very long, dark and forbidding pathway as a parent with a very "special" child.*

*Stacie Metelmann, Parent*

### CAC

*Receiving the AT Key (award) was a wonderful surprise! I thank you and the IPAT Consumer Advisory Committee for the honor. AT opens so many closed (locked)*

*doors for so many people. I guess we will continue our persistent knocking one door at a time! Keep the faith!*

*Janelle Olson, P&A Advocate, Consumer*

IPAT Staff and Consumer Commitment

*I think two of your greatest strengths are your commitment to the consumer and your "team," There's nothing better than working on a good team. They are hard to find and you have a good one. I deeply thank you all.*

*Amy and Beth, Guest Trainers from Utah*

Regional Coordinators

*Greetings from Fargo, or to be more specific, Command Center One. I have a new headset for my tv/radio so I can listen or watch as I dictate a letter into my new voice activated computer system. We finally got the computer table situation on the right track. The original design wasn't functional at all, so we sent it back and stated over again. He put new wheels on it and Mike saved the whole program by designing a complete new top, which works beautifully, but which he is going to make even better today.*

*I can't help thinking back to when I first met you. Here was this woman telling me about all this new equipment, and I'm thinking, "yes, maybe when pigs fly!" Well, I'm proud to announce, Pigs are flying!! I expect my rebuilt (ECS) any day now and my computer system is working beautifully, and my only real complaint is that I can't learn fast enough. My tutor seems to think we're making good progress, and maybe we are, but when I think of all the time I've wasted in the last 8 years, it's a little frustrating.*

*Well, I guess what I'm trying to say is "Thank you." Keep up the good work, and stop in when you have time.*

*C. Wesley Archer, Consumer*

*Thank you for all your help.*

*Sady*

## **What Challenges Remain?**

North Dakota has made significant progress in efforts to increase knowledge of, access to, and funding for Assistive Technology for individuals with disabilities in the past five years. However it is a good time to inventory the challenges that remain.

Barriers to funding are on-going, there is still a need for increased awareness of AT solutions, and more trained AT service providers are needed throughout the state. The ruralness of North Dakota finds people living in isolation with large distances between other individuals with similar needs and trained providers to give assistance. North Dakota will always need rigorous outreach activities to reach the majority of its population.

The number of elderly persons in North Dakota is increasing significantly. Residents who are elderly are only beginning to discover the opportunities for home and environmental modifications which will promote aging in place and independent living. The telecommunications and information infrastructure will require ongoing technical assistance to assure that newly evolving technologies and services are integrated, available and accessible to ALL persons, industries, employers and users.

Healthcare systems such as Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurance are increasingly shifting and using managed care groups to provide care. Policies must be revisited and revised to assure appropriate selection as well as cost-effective funding of medically related Assistive Technology devices and services.

The incorporation of Assistive Technology into multiple federal disability-related statutes has increased the need for technical assistance and the provision of accurate, accessible information so individuals with disabilities are able to maximize the educational and employment opportunities created by laws such as the Tech Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the re-authorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Rehabilitation Act.

As technology continues to advance there is increasing need in North Dakota for a consumer responsive system to keep pace with new technologies and be the radar system to signal potential barriers and/or remove existing ones to accessing these new technologies. There remains a need in North Dakota for a program that can cross all disabilities, age lines and assist with building public and private partnerships that influence policy and support ongoing system improvement. This assures that individuals with all types of disabilities and of all ages have access to Assistive Technology which enables them to learn, work and live independently.

## Directory of North Dakota Assistive Technology Resources

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AT Help-Line  
1-800-472-2911  
Get answers to all types of AT questions  
List and look for used AT equipment

IPAT Equipment Loan Library  
1-800-421-1181  
Call to borrow AT equipment/devices for trial use

Adaptive Equipment Services

1-800-252-4911 ext. 4583

Inquire about equipment fabrication or equipment vendors

Protection & Advocacy

1-800-472-2670

Get help in resolving AT service/device barriers



**1-800-265-IPAT (4728) V/TT**  
**<<http://www.ndipat.org>>**