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A collaborative effort of the Center for Disabilities Studies & the Delaware Developmental Disabilities Council

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About this issue

The Delaware Assistive Technology Initiative (DATI) recently launched its new website to improve access to technology and information for Delawareans with disabilities. The new site features an inventory of all equipment at the Assistive Technology Resource Centers and an online classified section for equipment exchange. AT providers and numerous other resources are also listed. DATI provides the latest available information and maintains a “Breaking News” database for people to register for email updates. Check out the new and accessible site at www.dati.org.

Assistant Technology: State of Our State

Assistive technology (AT) is broadly defined as any device that assists persons with disabilities. This technology spans the gamut from low-tech devices, such as canes for those with visual impairment, to high-tech communication devices and computer access tools. Whether used in the workplace, for therapy, recreation, or in daily living, assistive technology enables many people with disabilities to participate fully in life.

According to the National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research, nearly 16.6 million Americans with disabilities use special equipment, aids, or assistive technology (www.ncddr.org). Assistive technology (AT) is fundamental in the lives of individuals with disabilities. The new site provides a much more diverse array of information and resources for all of us.

Sincerely,

Tracy L. Mann, Editor

Delaware Activity

Delawarans with a stake in the continuation of DATI should be ready to respond quickly once draft legislation is introduced in the Senate. DATI has recently launched a new website to connect people around the state with updates about DATI and legislative issues. State projects and their clients and partners from across the country will need to communicate with their respective Senators and Representatives and with the congressional members of drafting committees. Check the DATI website for up-to-date information and legislative action, www.dati.org.

1. For more information on both programs, visit http://www.dati.org/funding/index.html.
AT as a Key to Independence

By Linda Brunner

Linda Brunner, a Delaware resident, shares her personal experience in hopes that readers can better understand disabilities issues.

programs and services throughout Delaware. Ms. Kenpf, originally a client of the peer job was to train volunteers who were themselves visually impaired. On a one-to-one Science, Ms. Sutlic began to lose her sight and changed her plans. She eventually again after they became blind. Originally preparing to work in the field of Animal Both Sharon Sutlic and Debbie Kenpf thought that they would be unable to work or old, much of life is spent depending on the visual information we receive. Finding Losing your vision is a stressful and emotionally draining experience. Whether young and is hard to define in just one way of doing anything. You just have to find out what works best for you.”

Before and after being diag-nostic with a move-ment disorder called Dystonia, my many challenges. In fourth grade, I had to adjust from being right-handed to being left-handed. I experi-en-ved people looking at me because I was different; sometimes, people would make fun of me. As I learned about my disability, I learned to live a life with my limitations to the best of my ability. My parents and I went to several doctors before I was diagnosed with Dystonia. My parents sought as much information about Dystonia as possible and found a support group that helped them better understand what was happen-ing. This is a challenging process, and I encourage fami-lies to actively seek information and find others who can share their stories and techniques for adapting to a disability. As an adolescent, I had lots of mixed emotions about my dis-ability. I felt left out because I couldn’t always catch the ball well or participate in different sports. My father assured me that I had different gifts and helped me to explore them. Exploring my gifts has given me a positive outlook on life. One way I explore this is through books: they can take a person many places. Assistive technology enables me to read books through lis-tening to recorded books. This technology, along with Braille or large print books, is a service of the Library of Congress. It can be a challenge for people without my disability to fully understand me. Sometimes, people don’t know how to talk to me: they are afraid, talk down to me, or talk to the person I am with who does not have a dis-ability. People with mobility dis-abilities can often easily ask for help. Another person can provide the assistance I need and can literally be my eyes, ears, or hands. Assistive technology helps a per-son with a disability participate in day-to-day activities. Sometimes, there is a way to adapt the activity so that it is accessible. Other times, howev-er, there are tools that make activities possible. Assistive technology comes in many forms and is hard to define in just one sentence. Instead, I’d like to share with you a few of the assis-tive technology devices I use to prepare food in the kitchen. Preparing my own meals is one key to my independence. In my kitchen, you will find: A dream that holds a bowl in place while I mix food ingre-dients together. It can also hold my plate as I eat or hold papers in place while I write a note. A can opener in a wooden holder designed by my father. A trivet on wheels that trans-fers food from the stove to the refrigerator. Specially designed eating utensils help me grip and fit my specific range of motion. A curved-handled knife, for example, helps me to use just one hand to cut my food. A book holder that can hold my cookbook while I cook. A handsfree plastic telephone that frees my hands for other activities. I use other AT throughout my home. The arthritis in my neck is helped by a supporting back-rest for sitting in a chair or car. In fact, to write this article, I used a slanted writing board, pens with writing grips, a touch pad mouse, and a clipboard. While these devices are com-mon office supplies, they help me to communicate. I envision my future as becoming more independent by using many of the devices described in this article. Newly-devel-oped technology will make my life easier. My goals are to share AT information with as many people as possible through writ-ting. Finding the right AT device can be of great benefit. An AT specialist or an occupa-tional or physical therapist can assist in the search. Participating in a technology user group, advocacy, and networking activities are also good ways to learn more about AT.

Making Employment Accessible

Imagine this scenario: you are sitting at your desk in your office. In front of you is a computer screen, and you sit there for hours day after day, typing away at the screen until you leave. The phone sits off to your right, next to message pads and a calendar. Files and books line the shelf that you often check for reference. In your weekly meetings, you scribble notes and monitor time, quietly looking at your watch. Now, imagine this same scenario after you’ve found out that you have a degenerative vision disorder and will be almost completely blind within a few years. What will happen to you, your family, your work, and your relationships?

Losing your vision is a stressful and emotionally draining experience. Whether young or old, much of life is spent depending on the visual information we receive. Finding ways to adapt a home to accommodate for a disability is often perceived as chal lenging and continuing to work may seem impossible. Both Sharon Statlic and Debbie Kenpf thought that they would not be able to work again after they became blind. Originally preparing to work in the field of Animal Science, Ms. Sutlic began to lose her sight and changed her plans. She eventually went to work for the Delaware Association for the Blind peer support program. “Just because you can’t see well doesn’t mean your life has to stop,” she asserts. Ms. Sutlic’s job was to train volunteers who were themselves visually impaired. On a one-to-one basis, volunteers help others to adjust to their own vision loss by connecting them to programs and services throughout Delaware. Ms. Kenpf, originally a client of the peer support program, became a volunteer a few years ago. Legally blind after experiencing a gradual loss of sight, Ms. Kenpf now works as a staff member with Ms. Statlic at the Association’s West Street offices, managing retail responsibilities that range from buying, selling, and organizing materials and working to cus-tomers’ individual needs and concerns.

These two women easily navigate the West Street store and perform their daily tasks in front of a computer using assistive technology. Ms. Kenpf uses a zoom function on her computer screen and sharpens the contrast to have white letters on a black screen. The keys on her keyboard have adaptive stickers so that she can see her keys bet-ter. She uses a CCU—a computer-controlled unit—to read printed materials and sometimes output for the audio program that reads material on the computer screen. When talking about the AT she uses, Ms. Kenpf shared, “There’s not one right way of doing anything. You just have to find out what works best for you.” Ms. Statlic carries a Braille note-taker for meetings, wears a Braille watch and often uses the audio program on her computer to read the screen to her. For print materials, she also uses a scanner with a software program that enables the words to be read to her. Ms. Statlic uses a standard telephone for herself at work, but telephones sold at the store have large numbers and textures on the buttons for easier recognition.

Using many types of assistive technology themselves, Ms. Statlic and Ms. Kenpf help customers with visual impairments select equipment and other adaptive products. The store sells a wide range of products at cost and works closely with the peer sup-port program to assist visually impaired people of all ages. Ms. Statlic demonstrates many of the items sold at the store including extra-long oven mitts for cooking, Braille playing cards, writing guides and popular movies with full narration. All assistive technology items found in the store share the purpose of creating an adaptive environment.

While having a disability may mean things will be different at work, it does not mean that a person has to give up his or her job or livelihood. In most cases, reasonable adaptations can be made, especially with the help of assistive technology. Ms. Statlic emphasizes that people with a disability must be assertive and be their own advocate. She confidently stresses that while visual impairment can be inconvenient, it is not life threatening. “I have a life to live, and I’m going to live it!”
Accessible Therapy and Recreation

On a ranch just outside of Odessa, Delaware, people of all ages with a wide range of disabilities are experiencing one of the oldest forms of “therapeutic” — Hippotherapy (literally, “treatment with a horse”), dates back to the ancient Greeks. C-Line stables stated that their research has revealed that individuals who participate in therapeutic riding can experience physical, emotional, and mental rewards, “Because horseback riding gently and rhythmically moves the rider’s body in a manner similar to a human gait, riders with physical disabilities often show improvement in flexibility, balance, and muscle strength. For individuals with mental or emotional disabilities, their unique relationship with the horse can lead to increased confidence, patience, and self-esteem” (The Center at C-Line Stables). One parent spoke of her daughter’s experience, “Her friends have activities, but no one else rides horses. It’s her own thing, something she’s really getting good at and the change I’ve seen in her self-esteem is amazing!”

The staff at The Center focuses on the individual’s needs by specifically tailoring riding lessons for each rider. Modified equipment, instruction, staffing, and horses not typically found at standard riding facilities assist in creating an adaptive program for persons with disabilities. Now serving 52 riders, the therapeutic program works with riders who range in age from 18 months to 80 years old who have various learning disabilities, speech delays, developmental, and/or physical disabilities. The Center is currently being reviewed for certification by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, Inc. (NARHA). Local support for the program has been strong and funding has come from New Castle County, The DFRC Foundation, and other community sources.

The entire experience for riders offers educational and therapeutic aspects at the same time. Instruction is individualized, and modifications for each rider are made with assistive devices such as a bareback padding, sheepskin covers, educational/mobility props, bells and buzzers, safety belts or harnesses, color coded reins, mounting equipment, ramps, lifts, and enlarged mounting blocks. For individuals with learning delays, educational elements are also incorporated into the session, colors, shapes, letters, and numbers.

One of the most distinctive modifications The Center has made for riders of varying abilities is the recent construction of the largest indoor, fully accessible riding arena in Delaware. Along with accessible horse mounts, the arena is specially insulated for climate control and holds riders. Inside the arena, The Center’s office will include a glass-enclosed therapy room that allows parents to watch their children and will also provide space for lessons and tutoring. On-site lessons and tutoring will integrate the activities of the riding arena with a classroom setting. Lessons for riders will take place at the same time as other riders, creating a fully integrated experience.

Many of the young riders at C-Line Stables volunteer for The Center’s therapeutic program, and this volunteer opportunity allows for an inclusive experience for those with and without disabilities. “As an ex-school teacher, you want your children to grow up and see and experience and be accepted. Here, we accept and integrate everyone,” said Carlotta Cline, owner of C-Line Stables. Parents of children in both programs interact during lessons and report that the riding experience is very special for their children. Parents of children at The Center form an informal network for each other by sharing contacts and resources related to AT or other disabilities issues. Executive Director Pam Liverman sums up what is so significant about riding, “Horses are the equalizer—everyone is a beginner and starts off the same.”

Proceed to the next page in this section.

Educational Goals and AT

Children laugh and chatter as they leave school at the end of the day. Some stop by the office and say goodbye to the Ms. Janice, the secretary. A parent talks with a teacher about her child’s progress. The principal smiles and moves about the school, greeting students and teachers. John G. Leach School is a place where students are encouraged to meet their goals and teachers are inspired to create opportunities that allow all children to imagine the possibilities of learning.

Students at Leach School use a variety of assistive technology devices to support their communication, computer access, mobility, and daily living needs. Communication devices can range from a single message switch with a texture or symbol to a complex system of vocabulary pages that are linked together, operating much like a website browser. Students can use spoon handles for easier eating or a switch-activated pourer for a cooking activity. Students also use a variety of specialized equipment to help participate in school life. Computers at Leach School look very different from those at other schools. A screen can be placed over the monitor display so that a student can touch the screen instead of using a mouse. Keyboards can be customized for a one-handed user or with large buttons that are programmed with commands to read a book or draw a picture. Students may walk in the hallway using adapted standers with wheels that can be propelled with their arms. Principal Jack Jadhav explains, “AT is critical for students to move through all aspects of the program at Leach School.”

In recognition of the importance of AT in a student’s program and in response to a federal mandate for consideration of AT for each student, the Colonial School District has established a district-wide program to support AT services and devices. Barbara Brooks and Debbie Whitty-Norman serve as AT Coordinators for the District. Once the need for AT has been determined by a child’s team, the coordinator’s support is available for any student in the district. Ms. Brooks and Ms. Whitty-Norman work with teams and students to determine the optimal set of AT tools to meet a student’s unique needs. This assessment often includes identifying the student’s needs, the environment in need of support, the tools that need to be informed, and the right tools to access the curriculum. A trial period with a variety of tools may be necessary in order to pinpoint the best match for the student.

The need for AT is documented on an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The IEP process brings parents, teachers, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and psychologists together to define the student’s program. They collaborate to identify necessary supports, services, and accommodations, including AT, needed to meet the student’s learning objectives. Because an IEP is a legal document, its plan must be followed.

“Strong supports are needed for students using assistive technology—it requires a combination of therapy, teacher attention, training, maintenance, and repair,” Ms. Whitty-Norman explains. Along with assuring that students have necessary AT, Ms. Brooks and Ms. Whitty-Norman provide training for teachers and other professionals at the schools. They also research the latest technologies and programs, find grants, and strive to apply best practices to the schools in the Colonial School District. Because it is purchased through the district and not by an individual school, equipment can follow the students regardless of their school placement. A central equipment resource center at the school also provides a variety of tools for trials and replacements in case of equipment breakage.

In addition to these district resources, the Delaware Assistive Technology Initiative (DATI) offers a lending program for the benefit of students throughout Delaware. Teachers help students borrow equipment, try it out, and see if it’s what they will need as they attend school. With the support of the Colonial School District’s AT program, students at Leach School and throughout the district are able to access the curriculum and achieve scholastic success with the support of tools that meet their specific needs. As students with and without disabilities work through lesson plans that incorporate AT, they benefit from an inclusive classroom where activities and experiences are shared by all students.

Through the use of AT, students achieve success. Families report positive results are a real part of the process at Leach School. Leach School unites families, teachers, and professionals to find the appropriate AT to help students attain their educational goals. Principal Jack Jadhav reports, “The AT program is a tremendous asset to Leach School and the district.”
Community Inclusion Through Service

Emanuel Jenkins, known as Mann, was diagnosed at an early age with Cerebral Palsy. He has limited mobility and uses a high-tech wheelchair for most activities. In early adolescence, Mann wanted something to do to get out of his house and interact with his peers. He and his mother discovered the Boys and Girls Club in Seaford, and from the start, he was hooked. Mann has now been volunteering at the club in Seaford since he was 11 years old. About volunteering, Mann says, “We all know someone else doesn’t know—and we can take the time to show what we know to others who will then be able to teach someone else. Through volunteering, everyone can come together as one.”

Mann’s focus on community and personal action, combined with humor and patience, has led him to the AmeriCorps program in the Boys and Girls Clubs in southern Delaware. During this interview for Delaware, several students shyly approached Mann, not wanting to interrupt the interview but wanting his supportive comments on homework or a smile and a goodbye. At the Boys and Girls Club, he can be found doing anything from homework help, to creating brochures, to running a leadership group with the children called “Ticket to the Future.”

The Ticket to the Future program was developed by Mann to help students learn to set goals for the future. It motivates students and demonstrates that they can plan for challenges and obstacles by setting goals and working toward them. The Dragon Naturally Speaking computer program supports his work with the children. Mann uses the program to help him access files and create documents. With a headset, he is able to speak commands that the computer recognizes and responds to. The children have become acquainted with the ins-and-outs of his work, and as Mann puts it, “They know that when Mr. Mann has the microphone on, cut the noise off, bring the volume down.” If there is too much noise in the room, the Dragon Naturally Speaking program does not work. The tools that Mann uses to provide the important goal-setting program for the children at the Boys and Girls Club also help him keep the children focused. During the Ticket to the Future program, children crowd around Mann and talk about what is happening in their lives and the lives of those they care about. “When I first got here, the kids would ask me, ‘what button is this?’ or ‘why are you in a wheelchair?’ They asked if I had been in an accident. I was able to tell them that sometimes people get a disability through problems at birth and was able to show them everything I could about my wheelchair. Now the kids know more, and they can share it with their friends. I deserve the same respect as someone standing, and the kids know that,” Mann explained. Not only does his use of AT enable him to work with Boys and Girls Club staff members so that, as a team, they can create a supportive educational environment for the children, but also his sharing his personal experience of living with a disability through AT use educates the children. AmeriCorps director for the Boys and Girls Club, Kathy MacKayre says, “Emanuel has a real dynamic personality—he’s really fun. His happiness resonates and makes people want to be a part of what he’s doing and learn with him.”

Mann recommends volunteering to other individuals. He notes that, “If you volunteer, you’ve got to be ready to work, and you need to be creative. You need to have the right match.” Assistive technology can help people in their volunteer positions, but an individual’s personal drive and dedication creates a truly successful position. Ms. MacKayre also emphasizes, “The program has to be ready to accommodate; it takes work on the part of the program to make things accessible and work toward availability of assistive technology.” She explains that the Boys and Girls Club is still learning about accessibility and assistive technology issues, and new situations bring new opportunities for learning.

Ms. MacKayre and Mann are hoping to work together to create a plan for inclusion that will open the Clubs up to more children with disabilities. Mann plans to extend his AmeriCorps time by serving as a disabilities coordinator to increase accessibility and broaden the participation of children with disabilities in the Clubs.

The Delaware Service Inclusion Project (DSIP), through the Center for Disabilities Studies, works with AmeriCorps programs like the one described above. The DSIP encourages individuals with disabilities to apply to AmeriCorps. The DSIP also works with AmeriCorps programs across the state helping the programs understand and address accessibility issues. In November 2003, the DSIP hosted the Delaware Service Inclusion Project Conference. The largest conference of its kind in the country attracted over 105 individuals to its two-day event. People attended from Delaware, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky to learn about including people with disabilities as volunteers and members in National Service programs. Mann, who presented at the Delaware Inclusion Conference and the Delaware People First Conference in April 2003, is a strong advocate for volunteerism. “My job lets me help the kids—we find connections, and there is a real joy in knowing you’re helping someone!”

The Delaware Service Inclusion Project (DSIP) provides training and technical assistance for Delaware’s National Service programs. DSIP supports Delaware’s AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, Learn and Serve, AC+VISTA, and Public Allies programs to include more people with disabilities as members and volunteers. A joint effort of the Center for Disabilities Studies and the Delaware Community Service Commission, DSIP is partially funded by the National Service Inclusion Project.

If you have an interest in:
• participating in community service through AmeriCorps or similar programs,
• forming a partnership with your organization and a Delaware National Service Program, or
• scheduling speakers or training programs on volunteer service and working with people with disabilities,
Contact: DSIP Judy A. Greene, Center for Disabilities Studies, 302.831.2028, jgreene@udel.edu.