



IN THIS ISSUE....

If You Build It, They Will Come: Post-AT Act Statewide Network Building

With the AT Act reauthorized but lacking funding, many state and local assistive technology AT organizations are seeking ways, not only to grow, but to survive in a time when federal AT funding may be evaporating. A few states have well established, relatively secure AT networks that will likely weather the current financial pressures. In other states, AT organizations exist as best they can with no formal network and only temporary alliances.

There is hope, however, that in-state AT organizations, by learning how to find common ground and to collaborate in ways that enable them to meet the needs of multiple constituencies, can construct webs of statewide AT organizations at a time when they are most needed: now.

This issue examines statewide AT networks and the resources currently available understand and contact them.

Dr. Elizabeth Lahm Speaks

More than 30 years ago, Elizabeth Lahm was a newly minted college graduate seeking a position as a physical education teacher. By August, with no job forthcoming, she heeded an uncle's advice and accepted a position as a physical education teacher specializing in adaptive technology. Eight years later, admittedly "burned out" by the challenges faced by every special ed teacher everywhere, she left the field when she and

her husband departed their California home for his new job in Virginia.

Aiming for a new career as a data processor, she returned to school in Washington, DC's Virginia suburbs. When her husband suggested marrying her new skill to special education, "I laughed," she recalls. "Then I took him up on his challenge and began a wonderful career that I never, ever anticipated." Had she failed to heed her husband's advice, she chortles, "I'd probably be a data entry person somewhere."

Today, however, as Liz Lahm, Ph.D., she's the director of one of the nation's foremost statewide AT networks, the Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative (WATI), and is an expert at not just maintaining the WATI network, but at expanding its reach to possibly encompass in-state AT organizations sure to feel the funding pinch when AT Act funding dries up.

WATI emphasizes AT implementation to help children with disabilities ages birth-21 access services, curriculum and school and community activities. The WATI network increases the capacity of early intervention agencies, school districts and their partners to provide AT by making training and technical assistance available throughout Wisconsin.

Before accepting her WATI post two-plus years ago, Dr. Lahm taught children with severe disabilities in Minnesota and California and directed AT research projects in for-profit and university settings. Most recently she was coordinator of the AT graduate program at the University of Kentucky. She was also principal investigator

for several research and development projects in AT within the University of Kentucky's special education and rehabilitation counseling department and UK's Interdisciplinary Institute.

Dr. Lahm earned her undergraduate degree from St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, her Masters from Cal State/Los Angeles and a Ph.D. in special education technology from George Mason University in Virginia.

Supporting our interview with Dr. Lahm are resources aimed at providing information to in-state organizations looking for ways to join with others in continuing to provide AT-related services to their constituents in an era of funding scarcity. We also feature members of our **Knowledge Network**. The members spotlighted this month are successful statewide AT networks that may serve as examples for other organizations striving to build or join similar networks in the years ahead. We invite you to contact these members for further information.

Please share this newsletter with other organizations, families and professionals who may benefit from it. We invite you to contact us at <http://www.fctd.info>. We welcome feedback, new members and all who contribute to our growing knowledge base.



Building a Statewide AT Network in an Outcomes Age: "It's Not Impossible"

*An Interview with
Elizabeth Lahm, Ph.D.,
Statewide Director, WATI*

In an age where measured outcomes decide the careers of educators and can redirect federal funding while impacting the fate of AT organizations at the state and local level, building a statewide AT network appears to

be an impossible task – until you ask Dr. "Liz" Lahm, director of the Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative (WATI), one of the nation's most comprehensive and successful statewide AT networks.

"I don't think building a network like ours is impossible," she declares. The key to success in any era, even this one when funding is increasingly scarce, she emphasizes, is grassroots collaboration among complementary organizations. In the absence of federal funding for AT Act projects, she is already seeing – and experiencing – a heightened level of cooperation among state-funded IDEA discretionary projects like hers and Tech Act projects seeking partners.

Collaboration

Recently, she says, she met with representatives from WisTech, an AT Act-funding statewide project that provides adults with information on selecting, funding, installing and using AT. The theme of the meeting: possible collaboration between WATI, a state-funded organization emphasizing AT implementation for children with disabilities ages birth-21, and WisTech.

"WisTech was mandated to write a three-year plan and they wanted to know how we could collaborate with them. We were looking at ways to [do that]."

One way, she notes, is training. "For years the Tech Access Conference in Wisconsin was put on by WATI and the Milwaukee Public Schools. Then it was ended. We took a look at the gap that was created by the absence of this state conference. The upshot of our investigation: We're doing another one in the spring of 2007, combining it with the WATI Leadership Institute. One of WisTech's mandates is to do training. So, we considered whether or not it makes sense for us to run a statewide conference involving the two groups. WisTech can focus more on the adults, attracting them, and WATI can bring in the school age segment – birth to age 21 – and we can hold it in the same

facility and get a better price on food, advertising, etc.”

Cooperation that Makes Practical and Economic Sense

AT entities in almost every state, she asserts, can join forces and collaborate in the areas where it makes economic and practical sense to do so.

Collaboration need not be limited to an actual event. Information sharing between state and local AT organizations is now more critical than ever, Dr. Lahm declares. “Through WATI, I serve just public schools. So I don’t hold training sessions that are just for families. Families can attend, but I don’t advertise that way.” WisTech, she explains, “can advertise to families, or to consumers or higher education institutions, or tech college programs and independent living centers.”

The point, she adds, “is that the information needs to be gotten out and shared so that organizations can pool their resources and offer a level of AT services that is needed. Broadcasting information to the largest pool of individuals possible should result, theoretically, in better participation. That’s how organizations can evolve in an era where federal funding for state AT networks is becoming more problematic.”

Covering the Waterfront

The loss of AT Act federal funding, while a blow, can also be a blessing and a boon to the collaboration effort. “It brought WisTech and WATI together,” she says. Although Dr. Lahm’s earlier professional experience in Kentucky and Virginia occurred during a different generation of the Act, “My understanding was that was that the Act didn’t impact school age children and their families as much as it impacted adults.” Now, she notes, “there appears to be a stronger mandate for state-level AT organizations to cover all ages. WATI can help WisTech fulfill that mandate. By

sharing our school age coverage, WATI and WisTech can present a coordinated effort.”

WATI and WisTech also considered collaborating on tech fair coverage. “We show technology at our leadership institute and at our summer institute and when our teachers get together, but you can only tap vendors so many times. If we had a tech fair that invited a broader swath of attendees, then we could afford to do those fairs on a regional basis. We can do more collaborative initiatives like this if groups work together.” So there’s an actual positive aspect to the consequences of AT Act reauthorization and to other realities of the current era, she adds.

Collaboration on AT Funding and Used Equipment

The topic of AT funding emerged in the conference. Dr. Lahm recalls, “WATI doesn’t really deal with funding; we help school districts make decisions but leave the funding up to the districts, whereas Tech Act projects, and WisTech in particular, have assembled a lot of information on how to obtain funding. I can now share that information with school districts, which can then look at alternative funding sources, such as the alternative loan program. That’s a benefit for me that I didn’t have before. That’s what sharing and pooling of expertise is all about.”

She notes that there is statewide potential to collaborate in other areas, as well, like used AT equipment. “WATI runs a used AT equipment marketplace. I learned that there were seven such marketplaces besides ours around the state. It doesn’t serve our people around Wisconsin to have multiple lists of people who trade AT, so why can’t we collaborate and put a single list together? It’ll be cost effective: instead of eight people assembling separate lists, one individual will compile and maintain one list. Collaboration makes things happen.”

Network Building: It's Easier in Co-op States

Dr. Lahm concedes that network building is easier in states like Wisconsin, where co-op resource sharing arrangements among AT organizations are mandated by state legislation.

"Wisconsin has a very good statewide system," she declares. "Very few states have statewide AT systems as extensive as ours." Funded by Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (DPI), WATI was founded 12 years ago by Penny Reed.

According to Dr. Lahm, Wisconsin is divided into 12 Cooperative Education Service Agencies (CESAs). One WATI consultant is housed in each of the 12 CESAs. "Housing consultants in these geographic units have been a major ingredient in WATI's success as a statewide network. These consultants don't maintain offices at the state DPI and then have to travel to a site to troubleshoot. They live where they work and are a permanent part of the community structure."

Each consultant is responsible for serving the local CESA and the school districts within that CESA. The services offered by each CESA are not necessarily identical, Dr. Lahm explains, because CESAs are independent organizations. Although they are co-ops by structure, CESAs function on contracts from school districts. "CESAs get only a small percentage of their total annual funding from the state's DPI. Their services are responsive to their local districts and their actions and initiatives do not necessarily represent DPI wishes or reflect DPI policy." Each CESA offers its own services, administrates itself independently and promotes the organization and the services offered in its own way.

Different Responsibilities for Different CESAs

Because each of her consultants works under the CESA umbrella and is actually employed by the CESA, their responsibilities are as

different as the CESAs they represent, Dr. Lahm explains.

In structure, policy and services, there is a significant variation among the 12 organizations, which encourages consultant flexibility. WATI is not a rigid program that imposes its will or policies on a geographic CESA, she says. Command and control is limited to non-existent by intent and design, "which has certainly helped these consultants fit seamlessly into the local areas in which they live and work," she asserts.

"I have one statewide consultant who is half-time and serves the entire state. If there's a particular training need or if a WATI CESA consultant needs support from an additional trainer, for example, the statewide consultant can, as a floater, go into the individual CESA and meet that need and many other needs as well. So we have operational flexibility. The WATI network has served the state well with that flexibility."

An Advisory Committee for Each "Embedded" WATI Consultant

The WATI main office is located in Oskosh and is totally separate from the state DPI, Dr. Lahm notes. "Out of my office here in Oshkosh, I run the lending library, conduct product sales and coordinate training events. I have a statewide advisory committee which pulls from higher education, teachers, state DPI professionals, school administrators, plus other stakeholders statewide."

Each of the 12 "embedded" WATI CESA consultants has his or her own small advisory committee, which performs tasks similar to Dr. Lahm's statewide advisory group but on a local level and is comprised of local representatives. "These local advisory committees help the stakeholders become more invested in WATI," she says.

Below the WATI advisory committee on the statewide WATI organization chart, at the consultant level, each of the consultants also has a leadership group. Those groups, Dr.

Lahm notes, consist of individuals that each consultant has nominated from his or her own respective geographical area, "individuals who our consultants believe have demonstrated leadership qualities, good use of AT and demonstrated an ability and a willingness to share capabilities and ideas with others, perhaps in training."

These leadership group nominees, she explains, "might be AT specialists in the school district or a classroom teacher, a therapist, or a professional in any number of roles that touch on the use of AT." In short, "each nominee is judged by the WATI consultant to have gone a step beyond what others might do to search out and implement the use of AT in a positive way."

150 Leaders Statewide

Across the state, about 150 individuals serve on these leadership groups. Each leadership group is sized according to the scope of the district it represents. Twice annually, Dr. Lahm says, leadership group members are assembled for a full day of training, as an award for their leadership contributions in their districts. Once a year, a national speaker is invited to address the group. "At other times, we'll invite an AT authority from within the state to speak. Occasionally, one of our own consultants might act as a presenter. These sessions provide our leaders with a level of advanced AT training unavailable anywhere else."

WATI provides these sessions free of charge. "However, we request that the school districts provide the substitute teacher and reimburse teachers and other district employees for any travel costs they incur attending our training sessions. This helps us get buy-in from the school districts to complement the reward to the individual invitees for their leadership in AT."

Bringing WATI leaders together twice a year gives them a chance to network across the state, says Dr. Lahm. "They get to know each other better, even within their own

CESA if not across the state, building collegiality."

A Listserv Aids Information Sharing

Last year, she says, "we established a listserv among them as well, so that they have yet another avenue for information sharing." The listserv is still new and is not yet totally up and running, she admits, although it's been utilized several times. "A teacher might use it to communicate student characteristics and abilities in an effort to seek possible solutions for difficulties that student might be experiencing." Usually, she notes, these communications produce a flurry of substantial and useful responses from around the state.

The listserv, she insists, "is not causing professionals to become preoccupied with email, but the seeds have been planted that will result in yet another way for AT professionals to share crucial information and solutions with their colleagues in the field statewide." This mechanism, she declares, gives them the confidence to ask questions and to share while validating their own value as professionals.

"Not only do my consultants have their own advisory committee and leadership group, but half of them have also developed their own networking groups, or user groups." Once a month, or every other month, these groups will hold an open lab night with a speaker. "It's yet another opportunity for those who want to talk about AT to come together to share ideas and interests with others in the field and to build useful, lasting relationships around AT."

Impacting Individual Schools Statewide

"One of our assumptions is that these leaders are taking information back to their school districts," she notes. "Last year, we wrote up some guidelines for our consultants on how to choose members of their leadership groups. One of the criteria is a clear demonstration that candidates for group membership are sharing this

information with their school districts informally. We're trying to encourage them to be leaders in AT, even if it's only in their own school building. They should be sharing the handouts they've received from us. They should also be conducting mini-training sessions or serving as an AT specialist on an IEP team."

Through the networking web WATI has built in Wisconsin, "we are getting down to the level where we are impacting individual school buildings statewide, building a web of support for professionals who want to provide AT and who don't want to feel as if they're out there alone, a lonely voice crying in the wilderness. The network established by Penny is working well here and is the foundation for much of the success we've enjoyed in this state in spreading the word about AT down to the grass roots."

Her Advice to Network Builders: Reward Knowledge Sharing

Her advice to AT professionals who seek to build networks in other states hard-pressed by fiscal constraints: Reward those who share AT knowledge.

Without a mandated co-op system like WATI's, network building can be a challenge, Dr. Lahm concedes. WATI consultants have funding support from the state grant and they each have between four-tenths time and eight-tenths time to devote to WATI. "I think it would be easier to build a statewide network in a state that already has a co-op system in place to build in this intermediate level and then moving it down to the district level and finally to the individual building level."

However daunting, building a network that meets the needs of individual states can be accomplished. "It's a matter of finding ways to reward individuals who have an interest in learning more about AT, who have an interest in making the time to share their knowledge with others." With some

encouragement, she explains, "professionals who might be making important strides in the use of AT in their own classrooms or buildings would be willing to share what they know with a larger group if some entity gave them recognition for their contributions to the AT knowledge base."

The fact that knowledge sharers are presented with the opportunity to attend a leadership institute free, "means they are being rewarded for that small chunk of time and effort that they're donating to the cause of spreading important information about AT. If these state special ed conferences would have a session or a workshop dedicated to AT, it would not be hugely expensive to work out an arrangement with whomever is running the conference to get a reduced cost to send professionals who want to know more about AT." This, she says, gains recognition for those who are contributing to the AT information flow and gives them an incentive to keep doing it.

After attending the event, the next step is to persuade the attendees to write a paragraph or two about the value of the experience in the state newsletter, for example. "There are ways to look at building in that recognition and reward for sharing and for encouraging professionals in the field to network with their peers districtwide and then statewide," she notes. "That's a low-cost way to start the process of network-building," Dr. Lahm declares.

Another way to get this process off the ground, or to build on one that is already in the process of being built is to work with local AT vendors or product distributors, she adds. "One of our Wisconsin AT product distributors conducts several trainings for WATI at no cost to WATI. She trains us on the products that she sells, and gets sales from these demonstrations. It benefits us and it benefits her."

From One-on-One Relationships to Full-Blown Networks

Graduating from a series of one-on-one transactions to a statewide, fully functioning, interconnected, integrated network requires a prime mover, an individual motivated to build an integrated web of relationships district by district, Dr. Lahm says.

In Wisconsin, “we’ve enjoyed the luxury of having someone whose job was to make that happen.” In every state, she insists, “there’s probably an individual at the state Department of Education who has an interest in AT and who can take some leadership in that area to kick off the foundation-building process.

That person, she continues, will likely have some time to devote to it, to jump-start it and keep up some momentum. “It could be done on the Councils for Exceptional Children in the technology and media division. There are some states with very active CEC chapters that have natural leaders among their membership.”

The same can be said for universities, for example, and other organizations. “There are various organizations and entities that can be tapped into for leadership. What’s required is that someone takes the initiative to kick the process into gear. Here it was Penny Reed. Does every state have a Penny Reed? I hope so. I’d like to think so.”

Political Expertise Is Not Needed

Those leaders who emerge to lay the foundation for a statewide network need not be experienced political operatives, nor possess political influence, Dr. Lahm emphasizes.

Network building can be accomplished, or at least kicked off, by someone who has a feel for grass roots organizing on the local level and then building on it, she asserts. For example, it could fall to an individual from a larger school district that may have an AT specialist on the payroll.

“That person might begin to reach out to peers in other districts for information. Way back when I was working with the Fairfax County schools in Virginia, I had a very large assistive technology department – it was actually called ‘instructional’ or adaptive technology then – that had several professionals with strong leadership qualities who went on to lead a statewide AT effort that has proven successful through the years.” Aiding in that effort, she says, was an official at George Mason University. “I think that combination of strong local leadership, plus university-based support, is strong medicine.”

To get things going within a district, a leader might have the skill to build district by district, she notes. “Say a district has persuaded Judy Sweeney to conduct a workshop on brain-based learning and technology. That district may want to invite other districts to participate to help defray the costs. That can happen, and it’s a good starting point to develop mutual cooperation.”

This cooperation, which produces positive results, grabs the attention of state-level politicians, Dr. Lahm explains. “State politicians are experts at perceiving a popular, grass-roots groundswell and then associating themselves with it.”

In Wisconsin, Not Much of a University-Based Presence

Surprisingly, in a state with a strong state university system, there is little university-based activity in support of AT network building, according to Dr. Lahm.

“In my stops before coming to WATI – in Kentucky and Virginia – there was more AT activity at the university level than at the statewide level. In Wisconsin, and this seems odd to say in a state with so much academic activity, there’s very little involvement of higher education in AT -- or at least not nearly as much as I’d like and as I’ve seen elsewhere.”

Her CESA consultants, she says, “will talk to special ed or therapist classes at the college level and make presentations for college faculty, but that’s as far as that involvement goes on a statewide network level for AT.”

Admittedly, she adds, individual institutions here have built reputations in AT but that activity has not had a crossover effect on WATI’s statewide mission. “Maybe that’s due to the nature of a higher education institution: Many are there for research and training whereas organizations like WATI emphasize implementation. Maybe the mission of a statewide AT network and a university just don’t mesh.” But in Wisconsin, the connection ought to be much tighter and more collaborative, she says.

Is there not a place somewhere in the network building process where the interests of a grass-roots organization and the interests of a research-based university with some emphasis on AT might coincide? “Higher education is publishing-oriented. In order to publish, research data needs to be available. We’re not at the point where implementation provides research data a university can use. We not proficient yet at collecting outcomes data on kids with disabilities who use AT to contribute anything of significance to the higher ed publishing process” she concedes.

If Only...

In an era where outcomes are increasingly emphasized when funding is considered, the imperative to produce quantifiable results has had indefinite impact so far on WATI and perhaps other similar AT organizations elsewhere, she notes. “Even though we know that we do great things through WATI and that our school districts are serviced well and our kids are definitely benefiting from our organization’s presence in the state, I can’t prove it to you. I still can’t tell you that, overall, kids in special ed are doing better on state tests because they’ve had access to AT. I’m light years away from being able to quantifiably demonstrate that.”

Nevertheless, the pressure to bend with the prevailing wind in order to validate WATI’s value is real, she concedes. “Yes, it’s there, no question, but there’s a reverse pressure as well.” For example, she says, “Last spring when the end-of-year progress reports came out for the districts and the individual schools, the news reports were filled with quotes from administrators who said, ‘If only those kids with learning disabilities didn’t have to take this test, our results would be better.’”

Her reaction was, she recalls, “that I need to teach these administrators how to use AT so that kids can take the test better and learn better; administrators need to see the value of AT. Then I remembered that the state testing accommodations bureaucracy hasn’t yet gotten to the point where it allows those accommodations.”

Just because a student has been using a text-to-speech reader all year and he’s done well on curriculum-based tests, “I still couldn’t demonstrate that it was the technology that made the difference on a state test. There are too many variables – and the notion that using them is a form of cheating remains prevalent among too many administrators.”

One of WATI’s tasks, and the task of any burgeoning statewide AT network in any state, she declares, is to dispel that myth and demonstrate that using AT devices does not ruin the integrity of the tests. That can best be accomplished, she notes, by organizations like WATI that continually point out the purpose of the test, “but I think we’ve lost touch with what that purpose is. If we want to show student gain and what they know and don’t know, let kids who have been using AT continue to use it for the tests. Not being able to use accommodations means that kids can’t demonstrate what they’ve learned.”

A statewide network’s mission, she reminds, is to develop public awareness – nudging, pushing.

"A couple of weeks ago I made a presentation to our DPI on what assistive technologies kids can use for test accommodation and I was pushing the envelope. I kept saying, 'When -- not if, when -- we get electronic texts -- e-texts -- we will be able...' -- but we're not anywhere near that point in time yet. I will continue to push that point -- when, not if -- because kids can tell us what they've learned if they can use the accommodations."

However, she adds, "if I weren't standing in front of this audience and hammering this home, there'd be no reason for them to even consider this approach. That's also what state AT networks are for."

Talk Money

In an outcomes based political environment, and knowing that implementation, not outcomes is your organization's niche, how does a director communicate with government officials at the state or national level who use tangible, measurable outcomes to determine effectiveness? How does a director know that she is getting her message across?

"Talk money," Dr. Lahm replies. "That's not easy to do, but one of the things that I do is maintain a fact sheet here. I know that no matter how many library loans I make during the year, I can calculate that out to dollars. I can say, 'School districts did not have to pay X amount of money because they borrowed from my library. Boy, does that number look good!'"

State networks, she notes, "have to speak government officials' language, and their language is dollars. When I can say that we've saved school districts, whose coffers are empty, several million dollars this year, it speaks loudly. Does it make a difference? I don't know. But I can tell you that, initially, they did not spend this money on AT, because they tried it first, and they bought, I assume, what worked.

Counting What Counts

Many states are home to a loose grouping of local AT organizations that do not necessarily work in concert. How can they be knitted together into a more cohesive whole with statewide influence? Her advice to them: "You need to make these organizations believe in the premise that if they perform a task more efficiently, money is saved."

For example, "if you borrow AT equipment before you buy it to make sure that it's appropriate for your needs, you'll save money. If you train someone before the equipment is borrowed, than you know that the equipment was used the right way by someone who understands its optimal use. If you have a student who has a teacher who is trained, who borrowed a device and tried it with the student and found the right device before the money was committed and the student did better on the state test, then the school's results on that test improved. If the school doesn't fail the annual progress test, then it doesn't lose funding dollars."

Ultimately, she says, "it may appear to the untutored eye that the upfront cost of AT is daunting, but when administrators can see student improvement in learning -- I don't care if they improve on the test -- which means that these students will get a better job and have a better quality of life, then what's been spent is miniscule compared to what the positive outcomes are."

As important as measurement is today, she cautions state AT organizations against overemphasizing data collection at the expense of their primary objective: implementation. "There has to be a good balance, but, as yet, I don't know what that balance is," she admits. "I think it'll take the research experts in higher education to determine what that balance is supposed to be. But there has to be a balance, because I can collect tons of data and then not have time to figure out what it means, much less implement it correctly. Coming from a research background, as I do, I know I can

measure lots of things, but, now, on my side of the fence, I have to count what counts.”

What counts, she says, is dependent on a network’s main stakeholders. “There are always multiple stakeholders. For me, it’s my state DPI, because that state department provides my funding. I know that when my Department of Public Instruction wants me to complete this fact sheet that tells them how much money I’ve saved school districts, I will compile that fact sheet, because that fact sheet also goes to state legislators and they see those numbers and are impressed.”

However, she warns, “if I want to impress upon principals that the money spent is worth it, then I need to know exactly what information the principals need to have and then provide it. Principals want to save money, but they’re even more interested in the state yearly test, or making sure that they’re meeting compliance standards on hiring quality educators. This requires me to collect different kinds of data.”

Make Connections – and Nurture Them

WATI, says Dr. Lahm, was formed in a very different era. Today, building such a network may seem at first glance like a fruitless endeavor, but, in fact, it’s far from fruitless. “Now, more than ever, state AT networks are needed, because we are increasingly on our own in meeting the needs of the one constituency that matters most: the families of children with disabilities who need the technology to help them carve out a productive life.”

Networks, she says, are crucial in efficiently meeting those needs. “And while there’s no short cut to building these statewide organizations, there is one word that sums up what the effort to build them is all about: connections. Make connections and nurture them, because you never know what fruit they will bear on behalf of those who need us the most.”



RESOURCES

ARTICLES

Assistive Technology Act Statewide Grant Programs: Benefits for Families

By Martin E. Blair

Psy-Ed Corporation, 2004

The author, director of the Utah Assistive Technology Program, employs family case studies to show how provisions of the Tech Act can help families of children with disabilities gain access to AT. According to the author, “The [Tech Act] program has provided training for family members, device demonstrations, financial assistance through an alternative financing (low interest loan) program and technical assistance for teachers. [The Tech Act program] even assisted the family in making their home accessible.”

In addition, “State AT programs are involved in many ‘invisible’ activities as well. They work with state and federal agencies, consumer organizations, disability legal services organizations and others to remove barriers that get in the way of families and individuals accessing the technology they need. For example, many programs work with school systems to ensure that teachers have appropriate training regarding assistive technology.”

The author, however, makes no comment about how the lack of federal funding for the recently reinstated AT Act will impact the Tech Act organizations’ ability to continue to provide a superhighway to AT accessibility for families.

http://www.eparent.com/technology/tech04_02.htm

WEBSITES

Pennsylvania Parents and Caregivers Resource Network (PPCRN)

PPCRN is a 12-year old statewide cross-disability, grassroots network that supports

parents' and caregivers' efforts to help their children and adult family members with developmental disabilities. PPCRN and its POWER Network help families to form local groups and to network with other parents in their regions and across the state. The POWER Network provides quick links to other pertinent state and national resource networks, which focus on children with developmental disabilities. For more information on PPCRN, contact:

Pennsylvania Parents and Caregivers
Resource Network (PPCRN)
P.O. Box 4336
Harrisburg, PA 17111-0336
Phone: (717) 561-0098
Toll free: (888) 572-7368
Fax: (717) 561-0945
Contact: Sue Scott Dolan, Parent Director
Email: info@ppcrn.org
<http://www.ppcrn.org>

RESNA Technical Assistance Project

The Technical Assistance Project, sponsored by RESNA (Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America), provides assistance to 56 state/territory AT Programs as authorized under the AT Act of 1998. The technical assistance they provide is meant to enhance the efforts of the various programs and address the issues they may be having. They provide technical assistance in areas related to universal design, state procurement actions, and funding of AT. Their mission is to reduce barriers and increase access to AT devices and services for consumers with disabilities of all ages. For more information, contact:

RESNA Technical Assistance Project
1700 North Moore Street, Suite 1540
Arlington, VA 22209-1903
Phone: (703) 524-6686
TTY: (703) 524-6639
Fax: (703) 524-6630
email: resnaTA@resna.org
<http://www.resna.org/taproject/>

DisabilityInfo.gov

This website is designed as a one-stop information center for people with disabilities. It provides links to disability-related programs and resources made available by the U.S. government under a variety of subjects, including employment, education, housing, transportation, health, income support, technology community life, and civil rights.

<http://www.disabilityinfo.gov/digov-public/public/DisplayPage.do?parentFolderId=2>

Assistive Technology Solutions (ATS)

ATS provides evaluation, training, custom design and installation of a variety of AT devices and equipment in the Puget Sound region of western Washington State. Areas in which AT services are provided include: computer access, augmentative and alternative communication, work site accommodations, mobility, vehicle modification, consultations and custom design and modification. Evaluation and training services are provided at the client's workplace, home or school, eliminating the need for client travel and enabling ATS to provide AT services in the actual environments where the AT will be used. ATS sells no equipment and maintains no sales relationships with equipment vendors, ensuring objectivity.

<http://www.assistivetechsolutions.com/about.htm>

Assistive Technology -- By State

This site lists the states with AT programs that have centers located statewide. Each center has a range of AT devices for demonstration and hands-on trial. The programs in these states work to help children and adults with disabilities in various aspects of their lives, including education, employment, recreation, and independent living.

<http://endoflifecare.tripod.com/huntingtondisseasesupport/id157.html>

Iowa Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health

The federation is a statewide advocacy organization that links families to support groups and disability services in the community, county and state. The federation's website features an information library plus numerous links to other resources. For more information, contact:

Iowa Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health
106 South Booth
Anamosa, IA 52205
Phone: (319) 462-2187
Toll free (888) 400-6302 (families only)
Fax: (319) 462-6789
Email: help@iffcmh.org
<http://www.iffcmh.org/>

FACT SHEETS

Ed.gov

This website provides FAQs on funding, technical assistance and administration concerning the recently reauthorized AT Act, which denied federal funding for statewide AT organizations.
<http://www.ed.gov/programs/atsg/faq.html>

HearingLoss.org: Financial Assistance for Hearing Aids and Personal Assistive Technology

Sponsored by the Self Help for Hard of Hearing People (SHHHP), this fact sheet provides information and advice on ways to obtain funding from various statewide agencies. Helpful organizational links and other resources are also supplied.
<http://www.hearingloss.org/hat/faha.html>



KNOWLEDGE NETWORK MEMBERS

Family Voices of Rhode Island: Rhode Island Parent Information Network (RIPIN)

The Rhode Island Parent Information Network

RIPIN is a statewide, nonprofit agency that provides information, training, support and advocacy to parents seeking help for their children. The agency houses seven projects that provide services to Rhode Island families, including those with children with special needs. RIPIN's seven projects include:

- Parent Consultant Programs
- Family Health Parent Consultant Program, where parents assist families in locating health services for their children
- Family Voices, where families of children with disabilities come together and share information and support
- Parent Information and Resource Center, which serves families in gathering information about the growth and development of their child
- Parent Training and Information Center, that guides families in life decisions so they can achieve the best outcomes for their child
- Fatherhood, which promotes responsible fatherhood in the area

For more information on RIPIN, contact:

Family Voice of Rhode Island: Rhode Island Parent Information Network
175 Main Street
Pawtucket, RI 02860
Phone: (401) 727-4144
Toll free: (800) 464-3399
Fax: (401) 727-4040
Contact: Dawn Wardyga, Program Director
Email: familyvoices@ripin.org
<http://www.ripin.org>

Parent Education Network (PEN)

PEN

PEN is a Pennsylvania statewide coalition comprised of parents and children representing a wide range of disabilities and ages. It was founded 21 years ago as a Parent Information Network (PIN) organization and has grown to maintain nine regional parent support coordinators throughout the state. Their purpose is to assist parents in understanding their rights and responsibilities under federal and state law in order to communicate effectively with educational service providers. The organization's services are available to individuals who are:

- Receiving early intervention and pre-school programs
- In regular education classes
- In educational/residential placements
- Not yet identified as needing services, and
- Needing additional support in adult systems.

For additional information on PEN, contact:

Parent Education Network
2107 Industrial Highway
York, PA 17402
Phone (V/TTY): (800) 522-5827
(800) 522-5827
Spanish: (800) 441-5028
Fax: (717) 600-8101
Contact: Louise Thieme, Director
Email: pen@parentednet.org
<http://www.parentednet.org/>

Special Parents Information Network (SPIN)



SPIN is a statewide project affiliated with the Maine Parent Federation that provides information to parents and professionals on a one-on-one basis concerning services needed by children with disabilities,

educational rights and specific disabilities. They do this through a toll free statewide telephone number. SPIN also maintains a TDD, a telecommunication device for individuals with hearing impairments.

The organization publishes a quarterly newsletter with information on upcoming events, workshops, and articles of interest to parents of children with disabilities. SPIN also provides assistance to parents who are seeking to network with other families with similar interests and who wish to join existing parent support groups.

SPIN maintains a library of books and videos for parents and professionals. Topics include specific disabilities, parenting the special needs child, school issues and children's books on disabilities.

SPIN-published handbooks and workbooks include:

- *Putting It All Together*, a handbook for parents of children with emotional/behavioral disabilities. Included in the handbook is information about various disabilities, the special education process, services available for children and support information
- *Parent Support Network*, a workbook for creating successful community support groups
- *The Redbook*, a resource for parents and consumers that explains the Social Security system and work incentive programs
- *Maine Resources and National Resources*, a comprehensive list of state and national phone numbers, including toll-free phone numbers when available

For more information on SPIN, contact:

Special Parents Information Network (SPIN)/Maine Parent Federation
P.O. Box 2067
Augusta, ME 04338
Phone: (207) 623-2144

Toll free (Maine): (800) 870-7746
Fax: (207) 582-3638
Email: parentconnect@mpf.org
<http://www.mpf.org/SPIN/>

Commonwealth Autism Service: The Autism Program of Virginia (TAP-VA)



works with state and public agencies/organizations and other relevant groups in developing and implementing a statewide system of services for individuals with autism spectrum disorders. The organization, also known as Commonwealth Autism Service, is a statewide program providing services to families, professionals, agencies and organizations via the following means:

- Information and referral
- Technical assistance, in the form of consultation
- Training workshops and in-services, for school personnel
- Networking
- Follow-along
- Collaboration and leadership

A library of assessment instruments, literature, research articles, reference books, intervention materials, videotapes and related items is available. Scheduling a visit is recommended and children are welcome when accompanied by an adult. Consultations with families, consumers, schools, providers, organizations and agencies are arranged in a variety of settings. Training and workshops can also be requested and completed independently or accompanied by consultation.

Resource, Research and practicum activities have been established with Virginia Commonwealth University, Hampton University and James Madison University.

For more information about TAP-VA, contact:

Commonwealth Autism Service
2201 West Broad Street, Suite 107
Richmond, VA 23220
Phone: (804) 355-0300;
Toll free: (800) 649-8481
Fax: (804) 355-0932
Contact: Rick Turner, Chairperson of the Executive Committee
Email: information@autismva.org
<http://www.autismva.org/>

Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center (MPRRC)



MPRRC aids state and local education agencies in developing programs for families of children with disabilities by:

- Keeping abreast of recent developments in special education research and practice
- Assisting in the adoption of new techniques and practices
- Identifying and analyzing persistent problems
- Linking individuals with similar needs
- Gathering and disseminating information
- Training
- Providing help in completing grant applications

In addition, the organization directs technical assistance to the states, lead agencies, schools and parents; operates workshops and conferences for state and local education staff, teachers and parents; and provides expert consultation of special education issues.

MPRRC is one of six Regional Resource Centers and is part of the Federal and Regional Resource Centers Network (RRFC), which provides services to the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Trust Territories and the schools of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

MPPRC serves Arizona, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming.

Their services include assisting with the improvement process, assisting with the self assessment, specifically assisting with focus group process and analysis of data; assisting with a statewide project to address issues of secondary transition by assisting with design of the project and delivery of training; assisting with the development of an action plan for addressing issues of disproportionality; and assisting with developing and implementing a major system for recruitment and retention of special education professionals.

MPSRRC is housed at the Utah State University's Center for Persons with Disabilities.

For further information on MPSRRC, contact:

Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center (MPPRC)
1780 North Research Parkway, Suite 112
Logan, UT 84341
Phone: (435) 752-0238
TDD: (435) 753-9750
Fax: (435) 753-9750
Contact: John Copenhaver, Technical Assistance
Email: conna@cc.usu.edu
<http://www.usu.edu/mprrc/workgroups/cspdsig/cspdsig.cfm>

Louisiana Assistive Technology Access Network (LATAN)



LATAN aims to increase access to assistive technology in Louisiana by facilitating the development and implementation of a seamless statewide system of AT services and supports for individuals with disabilities. Consumer involvement is the key element to LATAN's ability to understand the AT needs of state residents and the barriers

to access that they face. A majority of LATAN's board of directors and most staff members are individuals with disabilities and/or family members of individuals with disabilities.

LATAN institutes an ambitious effort to keep the state informed through:

- Tech Notes on issues such as funding, AT in the classroom, buying, selecting, and maintaining AT and the role of AT in the workplace
- A website for resources dissemination and current AT information
- A quarterly newsletter featuring articles on current legislation, products, training and events, advocacy, classified ads, and a consumer spotlight

LATAN serves the rural, underrepresented areas of Louisiana that have less of a chance of being exposed to the latest technology. LATAN's continuous outreach activities help connect these areas to current trends in AT.

The organization is developing direct service programs in the following areas: equipment recycling, reduced interest loans, peer support networks, AT assessments and trainings, and empowerment trainings.

LATAN administers two innovative initiatives on behalf of families of children with disabilities, which are an AT loan program and PeerNet Support Network. In conjunction with Union Planters Bank LATAN now offers reduced interest, extended-term loans to acquire AT equipment. The PeerNet Support Network links AT consumers, providers and volunteers throughout Louisiana. The network is an easily accessible database through which AT consumers and others can contact each other for support, demonstrations and inquiries about equipment and vendors, providers and services. According to LATAN, "The logic behind this network is that an AT provider can set up and demonstrate an AT device but it is really other consumers and their families that can provide advice about

adjusting the equipment for optimal use in real life environments."

For further information on LATAN, contact:

Louisiana Assistive Technology Access Project (LATAN)
3042 Old Forge Drive
Baton Rouge, LA 70808
Phone: (800) 270-6185 (toll-free); (225) 925-9500
Fax: (225) 925-9560
Contact: Julie Nesbit, President and CEO
Email: jnesbit@latan.org
<http://www.latan.org/index1.html>

Ohio's Family Support Cooperative (FSC)



Funded by a grant from the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council and administered by the Ohio Legal Rights Service, FSC brings Ohio families of children with disabilities together to create an organized advocacy group and provides families with a comprehensive source of information, mainly through the use of the FSC website.

FSC supports and services are individualized, efficient, cost-effective and promote the autonomy of the family and a child's individuality.

FSC identifies barriers to delivery of those services and supports, guides policymakers through recommendations and generates a written plan of organized advocacy.

For more information on FSC, contact:

Ohio's Family Support Cooperative
Ohio Legal Rights Service
8 East Long Street, Suite 500
Columbus, OH 43215-2999

Phone: (614) 466-7264
Toll free (Ohio): (800) 282-9181 TTY: (614) 728-2553; (800) 858-3542
Email: FSC@olrs.state.oh.us
http://olrs.ohio.gov/ASP/olrs_FSCHomePage.asp

Peak Parent Center, Inc.



Peak, Colorado's Parent Training and Information Center, offers the following services: timely disability information; information about the special education process and parents' rights via the SPEAKout newsletter; inclusion resources that show how students can be successfully included in general education classrooms; referral to medical, educational, or human services; training in understanding IEP's, an education program entitled "Building Continuity: Grade to Grade"; accommodations and modifications; and advocacy; the annual Conference on Inclusive Education and School Reform in Colorado; state-of-the art publications focusing on strategies for families and teachers; and a calendar of parent support activities in Colorado sponsored by the Colorado Department of Education.

For more information on Peak, contact:

Peak Parent Center, Inc.
611 North Weber, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, CO 80903
Phone: (719) 531-9400
Toll free: (800) 284-0251
Fax: (719) 531-9452
Contact: Barbara Buswell, Executive Director
Email: info@peakparent.org
<http://www.peakparent.org>

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