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From the Executive Director's Desk

Equipment Distribution Programs

Take the time in this new year to find out if your state has an equipment distribution program to help you with your hearing loss.

In October 2012 I gave a keynote speech at the 15th national conference of the Telecommunications Equipment Distribution Program Association (TEDPA) in Lake Buena Vista, Florida. The conference provides a platform for state equipment distribution programs to network and learn about new technology that can benefit people with disabilities through presentations and the 37 companies that were exhibiting.

TEDPA is a national membership organization that supports programs involved in statewide distribution of specialized equipment for people with disabilities. TEDPA educates its members about regulatory issues and advocates for change to improve services for people with disabilities. They are reaching out to other organizations to form partnerships to improve outreach to people with disabilities, hence the invitation for me to speak.


Most states, 46, have some sort of distribution program with the exception of Connecticut, Delaware, Michigan, New York and the District of Columbia. The programs vary in which disabilities they serve from hearing loss to deaf/blind, speech, mobility, autism spectrum disorders as in Vermont, and cognitive disabilities.

Usually a third party has to certify that you have a disability and the eligibility criteria will depend on whether or not they have a means test with a sliding scale, a loan program, loan to own, voucher, or giving out the equipment free irrespective of financial means. Some programs take back the equipment if you leave the state; others allow you to keep it.

The range of equipment varies widely. Some states still only supply TTYs; others have volume-control phones, captioned telephones, speaker phones, tone-control phones, signaling devices and bed shakers, wireless devices, computers, artificial larynx systems, telecommunication accessories, and very soon possibly, even iPads.

Funding for the programs has traditionally come from a surcharge billed to all landline telephone customers. With the decline of landline use they are seeing a steep decline in funds available and therefore are pushing to have a surcharge on wireless bills as well. California, Kentucky, New Mexico and North Carolina already have a surcharge on wireless. States such as Florida and Maryland link the distribution programs together with the state relay service. Florida loans devices to all qualified permanent residents for as long as they need it at no charge. Funding might also come from allocations from the general assembly as in Virginia.

Depending on where you live you will find different approaches to providing you with the telecommunications equipment you need. North Carolina is unique in that you get to choose whether you want a phone or a hearing aid. Yes, a hearing aid. I was surprised when I learned that.

Check out and make contact with the program in your state at <http://www.tedpa.org/StateProgram.aspx>. There will also be a workshop on TEDPA at Convention 2013 in Portland, OR. 

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