

# ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: AN OVERVIEW



Figure 1: Man in manual wheelchair going up ramp to building.

Prepared by:

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# **ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: AN OVERVIEW**

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Assistive technology is a device or service that helps a person with a disability in his or her daily activities. Assistive technology can be found in the home, workplace, school, and community. Assistive technology helps a person with a disability to become or remain independent. This brochure describes assistive technology and provides general information on how to pay for it.

**IMPORTANT: This publication is for general informational purposes only. This publication is not intended, nor should be construed, to create an attorney-client relationship between the Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania (DRN) and any person. Nothing in this publication should be considered to be legal advice.**

**PLEASE NOTE: For information in alternative formats or a language other than English, contact DRN at 800-692-7443, Ext. 400, TDD: 877-375-7139, or [drnpa-hbg@drnpa.org](mailto:drnpa-hbg@drnpa.org).**

## **II. WHAT IS ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY?**

The Assistive Technology Act of 2004 defines an assistive technology device as “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities.” Assistive technology devices can be “low tech” or “high tech.” Examples of assistive technology devices are:

- power and manual wheelchairs, scooters, canes, walkers, and standing devices
- augmentative communication devices (speech generating devices), voice amplifiers, and speech recognition devices
- other durable medical equipment and medical supplies, such as patient lifts and incontinence supplies
- other orthotics and prosthetics, such as hearing aids and electric larynxes
- accessibility adaptations, such as ramps, stair glides, lifts, grab bars, flashing smoke detectors, lever doorknobs, environmental controls, and vehicle adaptations
- equipment and technology for work, study, and recreation, such as enlarged computer keyboards, text-to-speech software, voice recognition software, reachers, amplified telephones, magnifiers, and adaptive sports equipment
- equipment and technology for community access, such as accessible public transportation, ATMs, voting machines, and pedestrian signals

An assistive technology service is “any service that directly assists an individual with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device.”

Assistive technology services include:

- an evaluation of the assistive technology needs of an individual, including a functional evaluation of how assistive technology would help the individual
- purchasing, leasing, or otherwise providing an assistive technology device
- selecting, designing, fitting, customizing, adapting, applying, maintaining, repairing, replacing, or donating an assistive technology device

- coordinating and using therapies, such as occupational therapy or physical therapy, with assistive technology devices under an educational plan or rehabilitative plan
- training or technical assistance for an individual with a disability, or family members, guardians, advocates, or authorized representatives
- training or technical assistance for educational or rehabilitation professionals, manufacturers of assistive technology devices, employers, providers of training and employment services, and others who help individuals with disabilities
- a service that expands access to technology, including email and Internet, to persons with disabilities

### **III. HOW CAN I GET ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY?**

Several programs may pay for assistive technology if certain rules are met. Five major public funding sources are described below. You can find many more funding sources in our publication, “Assistive Technology: How to Pay for the Device or Service That You Need,” at [www.drnpa.org/publications](http://www.drnpa.org/publications).

#### **A. Medical Assistance (Medicaid)**

Medical Assistance is publicly-funded health insurance for eligible children and adults, including many persons with disabilities. Medical Assistance is provided by managed care health plans or is fee for service (ACCESS or ACCESS Plus). You can apply for Medical Assistance through your local County Assistance Office.

There are several ways to qualify for Medical Assistance in Pennsylvania. Depending on your level of eligibility, the types of assistive technology that may be funded include:

- medical supplies, including durable medical equipment (DME), prostheses, orthoses, appliances, and surgical supplies
- medical supplies, equipment, and appliances through home health care services
- medical supplies through Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment (EPSDT) for children under age 21, including eyeglasses and hearing aids
- medical supplies through the School Medical Program

For Medical Assistance to pay for assistive technology, a doctor's prescription is needed, and the item must be medically necessary. Prior authorization is often needed. An evaluation will also often be needed to help determine the assistive technology that is appropriate for you.

If Medical Assistance pays for you to be in a nursing facility or ICF/MR, the facility must provide you with medically necessary assistive technology devices and services.

**You have the right to get a written notice and to appeal a decision regarding your eligibility for Medical Assistance or coverage of assistive technology under Medical Assistance. There is a deadline to make an appeal. You may wish to contact a lawyer or advocate as soon as you are notified of a denial.**

## **B. Medicaid Home and Community-Based Waivers**

Pennsylvania has several Medicaid Home and Community-Based Waivers that pay for services that enable persons with disabilities to live in the community rather than in institutions like nursing facilities or ICF/MRs. Among other services, Waivers may pay

for assistive technology, such as equipment, technology, and medical supplies not available under Medical Assistance; home accessibility adaptations; and vehicle accessibility adaptations. An evaluation will often be needed to help determine the assistive technology that is appropriate for you. If you already receive services under a Waiver, contact your Supports Coordinator or Service Coordinator to request coverage of assistive technology.

If you do not receive Waiver services and would like to apply, contact:

- Your local Area Agency on Aging for the Aging Waiver for a person age 60 or older
- Maximus at 1-877-550-4227 or 1-877-824-9346 for the Independence Waiver for an adult with a physical disability, OBRA Waiver for an adult with a developmental disability, and COMMCARE Waiver for an adult with traumatic brain injury
- Your county Mental Health/Mental Retardation office for the Consolidated Waiver and Person/Family Directed Support Waiver for a person age 3 or older with an intellectual disability
- Bureau of Autism Services at 1-866-539-7689 for the Autism Waiver for an adult with Autism Spectrum Disorder

**You have the right to get a written notice and to appeal a decision regarding your eligibility for a Medical Home and Community-Based Waiver or coverage of assistive technology under a Waiver. There is a deadline to make an appeal. You may wish to contact a lawyer or advocate as soon as you are notified of a denial.**

### **C. Medicare**

Medicare is federally-funded health insurance for persons aged 65 and older; persons with End Stage Renal Disease; and persons who, for 24 months, have received Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Railroad Retirement payments based on a disability (there is no waiting period for a person with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis). You may receive original Medicare or may be enrolled in a Medicare Advantage HMO. For Medicare to pay for assistive technology, a doctor's prescription is needed, and the item must be medically necessary. A Medicare Advantage HMO requires prior approval for assistive technology. An evaluation will also often be needed to help determine the assistive technology that is appropriate for you. Assistive technology can be funded through Medicare Part A and Part B as durable medical equipment, prosthetic devices, and orthotic devices. Medicare Part B pays for power wheelchairs, augmentative communication devices, and other assistive technology.

**You have the right to get a written notice and to appeal a decision regarding coverage of assistive technology under Medicare. There is a deadline to request an appeal. You may wish to contact a lawyer or advocate as soon as you are notified of a denial.**

### **D. Vocational Rehabilitation**

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) helps persons with disabilities prepare for, start, and maintain employment. Your local district office can be found at: [www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=514&objID=606620&mode=2](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=514&objID=606620&mode=2). The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation may arrange for an evaluation of your needs for assistive

technology. The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation may also help you obtain assistive technology devices.

**You have the right to get a written notice and to appeal a decision regarding assistive technology through the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. There is a deadline to make an appeal. You may wish to contact a lawyer or advocate as soon as you are notified of a denial.** For help, please contact the Client Assistance Program at 215-557-7112 (voice/TDD) or 888-745-2357 (toll free). The website for the Client Assistance Program is: [www.equalemployment.org](http://www.equalemployment.org).

#### **E. Early Intervention and Special Education**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, or IDEA 2004, generally requires the county, intermediate unit, or school district to provide early intervention or special education and related services to a child with a disability. A child with a disability may receive assistive technology devices or services, including an evaluation and training, as a part of his or her Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

A student with a disability may also receive accommodations and services, including assistive technology devices and services, under Chapter 15 of the Pennsylvania regulations and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

**You have the right to get a written notice and to appeal a decision regarding assistive technology through early intervention or special education. There is a**

**deadline to request an appeal. You may wish to contact a lawyer or advocate as soon as you are notified of a denial.**

#### **IV. WHO SHOULD I CONTACT FOR HELP?**

If you need more information or need help, please contact the intake unit of the Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania (DRN) at 800-692-7443 (voice) or 877-375-7139 (TDD). Our email address is: [intake@drnpa.org](mailto:intake@drnpa.org).

The mission of the Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania (DRN) is to advance, protect, and advocate for the human, civil, and legal rights of Pennsylvanians with disabilities. Due to our limited resources, DRN cannot provide individual services to every person with advocacy and legal issues. DRN prioritizes cases that have the potential to result in widespread, systemic changes to benefit persons with disabilities. While we cannot provide assistance to everyone, we do seek to provide every individual with information and referral options.

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