



Assistive Technology Act Reauthorization

Background

Congress is scheduled to reauthorize the Assistive Technology Act in the Second Session (2004) of the 108th Congress. Congress enacted the Assistive Technology Act (ATA) of 1998 (PL 105-394) to help state governments address the needs of the disabled through the use of assistive technology (AT). The ATA was initially authorized in 1999 at \$56 million: The State Grant Program was authorized at \$36 million, National Activities at \$10 million, and Alternative Financing Mechanisms at \$10 million. All of these areas were authorized for appropriations in 2000 for “such sums as may be necessary”, and only the State Grant Program was authorized for appropriations for 2001 through 2004, again, for “such sums as may be necessary”.

The programs implemented through the ATA – state grant investments, Protection and Advocacy initiative, model programs, and nationally organized technical assistance – are essential for promoting assistive technology use and fostering collaboration among state-based agencies. The ATA is the *only* U.S. federal legislation that provides funding for AT programs, and it is the *only* legislation that addresses the AT needs of individuals from birth through adulthood.

The law is essentially divided into five parts: Findings, Purposes, Definitions, and Rules; State Grant Programs; National Activities - Rehabilitation Act of 1973; National Activities - Other National Activities; and Alternative Financing Mechanisms.

Presently, there is no bill in either the House or Senate to reauthorize AT, but CEC is actively participating with other disability groups to draft language that will serve as the basis for legislation in the Senate.

CEC Recommendations For Assistive Technology Reauthorization

In reauthorizing ATA, CEC, in collaboration with TAM, recommends that the following policies be adopted in the ATA when Congress reauthorizes the ATA in 2004:

1. Include language in the “Findings and Purposes” section of the bill that state that it is the role of the federal government to provide and support consistent and reliable sources of funding through state grant programs, using successful state-grant models, to ensure the development of both intra- and inter-state collaboration. Programs must be able to share information and work collaboratively to provide AT through existing programs.

2. Increase the amount of funding for AT services and devices to \$51 million for fiscal year 2005 and such sums as may be necessary for fiscal years 2006 through 2011.
3. Establish mechanisms in each state to encourage the appropriate use of AT devices and services to school-aged children and school systems. In promoting interagency communication, encourage policies that ensure the continued provision of AT devices and services for students as they leave the school system and enter the state's vocational system. This can be accomplished through amending Section 214(b) of the ATA of 1998 and replacing the word "may" with "shall" to *require* the Secretary of Education to make grants and provide financial assistance to increase the availability of AT devices and services to children and school systems with unmet AT needs.
4. Increase professional development for pre-service and in-service funding, programs, and authority with respect to using AT devices and services for eligible children and youth with disabilities under IDEA, including systems of training and technical assistance with emphasis on families and school personnel.
5. Develop a comprehensive research agenda on AT devices and services and implement a system to broadly disseminate the results of that research.
6. Include requirements that foster the use, support, and development of universal design principles and standards to ensure that all products, programs, or systems developed through the use of ATA funds are available to everyone. The requirements of Section 508 of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (which amended the Rehabilitation Act of 1973) will serve as the basis for discussion on future minimum requirements for universal design. Include language in this section that focuses on the governor's office of each state and interagency coordination.
7. Provide for the continuation and enhancement of a statewide information and referral system designed to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities, service providers, and others, relating to the availability and benefits of assistive technology devices and services, including accessible information technology and telecommunications. The system shall include a statewide toll free telephone number and a designated web site that conform to applicable accessibility standards of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

What You Can Do

In light of the significant contributions AT legislation has made in helping persons with disabilities (children and adults alike) and their families become more independent and productive in all areas of their lives, CEC, in collaboration with CEC's Technology and Media Division (TAM), strongly urges Congress to reauthorize ATA.

CEC has written a letter to Members of Congress that encourages the House and Senate to pass AT reauthorization in 2004 and to enact CEC recommendations when doing so. You too can write a letter to Congress on AT reauthorization by visiting http://capwiz.com/cek/mail/oneclick_compose/?alertid=5528541. Let Congress know where you stand on AT reauthorization!

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