COVID-19 Brief: Impact on State and Territory AT Act State Financing Activities

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on individuals with disabilities of all ages. Disability services of all kinds were impacted as were state and territory AT Act state financing activities in the pandemic's early stages.

State financing is one of four "state level" activities provided by states and territories under the Assistive Technology Act, along with device lending, device demonstration, and device reuse. State financing can include financial loans, last-resort funds, home modification programs, and telecommunication access programs among other services.

EARLY COVID IMPACT ON STATE FINANCING PROGRAMS

In March of 2020, during the early stages of the pandemic, some assistive technology (AT) state financing activities were initially impacted, along with most disability services, as states and communities began shutting down.

In the pandemic's initial stages, a number of AT financial loan programs reported a downturn in applications due in part to COVID's impact on AT vendors for devices such as hearing aids and adapted vehicles who were experiencing the same shutdowns in states as other businesses. AT financial loan program operations, for the most part, were not impacted, as these are conducted remotely with little or no face-to-face contact. Potential applicants commonly make inquiries via phone or email; applications are available on websites or through electronic or snail mail, and most loan programs that utilize loan review committees do so electronically.

Other types of state finance programs administered by AT programs (last resort grant programs, adapted telephone programs, deaf-blind equipment distribution programs, etc.) that sometimes involve face-to-face interactions for device demonstration and selection, initially required modifications before those services could be resumed. In a survey of state and territory AT Act programs conducted at the end of March, respondents reported that 56% of their state financing activities were operating as usual with no change; 34% were operating with modifications; and only 9% had temporarily suspended activities until modifications could be made (N=34).

COVID IMPACT IN LATER 2O20 AND OUTLOOK FOR 2021

Six months into the pandemic, states and territories reported using a wide variety of methods to market their state financing activities including brochures or flyers, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, regular use of e-mail marketing such as MailChimp and Constant Contact, mass mailings to vendors, and webinars presented to remote audiences to encourage program use.

As FY2020 came to a close, for financial loan programs reporting into the Annual Progress Report for state and territory AT Act programs, the data shows a slight increase in the number of AT devices financed from 975 in FY2019 to 987 in FY2020. Data shows a slight uptick in the percentage of hearing devices such as hearing aids financed from 48.7% in FY2019 to 55.8% in FY2020. The data shows the number of modified vehicles/vehicle modifications and transportation-related devices financed decreased from 27.8% in FY2019 to 18.6% in FY2020. There was an overall decrease in the number of financial loans made from 945 in FY2019 to 795 in FY2020 as well as in the total amount of dollars loaned from $8.5 million in FY2019 to $6.3 million in FY2020. The federal fiscal year runs from October 1st through September 30th.

In preliminary results from a survey of state and territory AT Act programs in January 2021, 56% of programs reported operating their state financing activities as usual with no modifications in service provisions due to COVID-19 with 44% reporting providing services with modifications. No programs reported a suspension of state financing activities (N=25).

AT Act programs were also asked whether, as of January 2021, demand for state financing services had changed over the past six months of the pandemic. Twenty percent (20%) of respondents reported an increase in demand for services, 32% reported no change in demand; while 32% reported a decrease in demand (N= 25).

For the remainder of FY2021, the impact of COVID on demand for AT financial loans and other state financing options may be impacted to a degree by the final elements of the COVID relief bill under consideration in the U.S. Senate (direct stimulus payments to individuals, unemployment supplements, rental assistance, etc.). Demand may also be impacted to a smaller degree by the extent to which states use last year's CARES Act funds for technology (such as tablet devices for individuals who have disabilities to combat social isolation and to access services such as telehealth). Finally, the speed with which COVID-19 vaccinations are provided to individuals and the subsequent return to relative normality for most aspects of daily life could impact the need for funding for AT to enable individuals with disabilities to participate more fully in the "new normal" in their states and communities.

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