

THE PATH AHEAD

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ALL ABOUT ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

We all can use a bit of help sometimes. While it's great if there's another person around to lend an extra hand, sometimes we just can't get that in-person support when we need it. So, what can we do to take care of our needs and also increase our independence? Finding the right kind of assistive technology might be the answer!

What exactly is assistive technology?

It's a tool that can help you complete a task on your own or meet a need that you have. Some assistive technology can be low-tech – meaning it's a simple tool, like a walking cane or pencils with special grips that make them easier to hold. Other assistive technology is high-tech – meaning it uses electronics, like a motorized wheelchair or telephones that provide closed captions of the conversations for people who have hearing loss.

Cindi Pichler, Senior Assistive Technology Specialist at IndependenceFirst, says assistive technology can help accommodate you at work so that you can do your job or help you navigate around town so that you can be in your community more often. It can also help you do tasks around the house or help monitor your safety so that you can live more independently.

With so many different types of assistive technology devices available, how do you know what is best for you? Cindi recommends that you start by getting an accessibility assessment from an Independent Living Center (ILC), like IndependenceFirst. Your IRIS Consultant can help you set up the assessment. The ILC representative will find out what tasks you would like help with and help you figure out your assistive technology options.

“You look at the individual’s situation and goals,” says Cindi. “Say this person cannot chop vegetables but wants to cook independently, so how can we help them chop vegetables? That’s how we begin to help people find the right type of assistive technology.”

Once you've learned about the different types of technology that might be helpful, you'll want to figure out how you'll pay for it. Some assistive technology might be covered by your IRIS budget, while other times you may have to pay for it.



Cindi says it's also a good idea to try out the assistive technology before you buy it. Wisconsin has a program called WisTech, which offers people the chance to use different assistive technology, and even take it home to see if it's a good fit for them. You can find the WisTech device loan programs at any of Wisconsin's eight ILCs, including IndependenceFirst.



Photo courtesy of IndependenceFirst.

“You wouldn’t buy a car without a test drive,” says Cindi. “So why would you buy a wheelchair without trying it out first?”

Once you’ve decided what assistive technology you would like to buy, the WisTech representative can help you find a vendor who sells the item. Cindi says before you buy the device, though, you’ll want to ask the vendor a lot of questions about the item:

- What is the warranty?
- What is the return policy?
- Who’s going to help me learn how to use this?
- How often does it need maintenance, and who’s going to fix it if it is broken?

“I do know a lot about technology, but I may not know a lot about the person,” says Cindi. “I only have one piece of the puzzle, and they have the other pieces.” Cindi says it’s helpful when people let her know that an item isn’t working for them. This helps her figure out other options to offer.

Talk to your IRIS Consultant to see if assistive technology might help you reach your goals. With so many options, you might find one that could help you live a fuller, more independent life!

Did you know that IndependenceFirst has over 1,700 assistive technology devices that people can try out at their WisTech loan center in Milwaukee? Visit independencefirst.org/IndependenceFirst/Independent-Living-Skills/Assistive-Technology.htm to learn more.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: HOW ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY HELPS ME

There are many ways that assistive technology can improve your life. Find out how these tools have helped some of the people who partner with TMG start their own business, find their voice and stay connected to family and friends. Thanks to everyone who shared their stories with us!



Sarah Barkholz

Sarah loves all types of technology and has used common devices and apps to live a more independent life. With her smartphone, Sarah can video chat with her friends to keep connected and use voice-to-text technology to send texts to her family. She also uses an online calendar to keep track of her work schedule, and a map app and online bus route to get around town.

When Sarah first got her smartphone, she was excited to learn all of the ways it can help her do things on her own. She now feels she has more control to live the life she wants.

Sarah's Words of Wisdom: "Don't be afraid to try out new technology!"



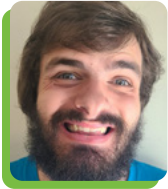
Lydia Dawley

Lydia has benefited from assistive technology for most of her life. As a person with cerebral palsy, Lydia has limited mobility and needs assistance to speak.

She uses an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device to communicate. This AAC device, along with other assistive technology, made it possible for Lydia to earn her degree at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

Today, Lydia owns her own company, called Click. Speak. Connect. She consults with speech therapists, teachers and parents about how to use AAC devices. She also helps kids who use AAC devices practice social skills and gain confidence in communicating. Lydia is happy to share her expertise with others and is excited to show them how assistive technology can help them live fuller lives.

Lydia's Words of Wisdom: "Do not limit anyone! Different situations sometimes require different types of communication access. Also, never give up on an idea. Just because it doesn't work today, doesn't mean it won't work tomorrow."



Gavin Schultz

Gavin is a young man with a lot to say. Using assistive technology and the rapid prompting method (RPM) has helped him express himself. RPM is a technique where Gavin touches letters on his iPad to spell out what he wants to say. Before Gavin had RPM to communicate, people often assumed he was unable to be part of a conversation. When Gavin learned how to use RPM, he says it made him feel empowered to finally have a voice and share his thoughts.

Gavin has been a public speaker at autism conferences, sharing his experiences using RPM. He also uses RPM to write poetry that he is proud of.

Gavin's Words of Wisdom: "Try assistive technology. You will never know if it will work until you do. Have a caring therapist, family or friend help you learn the device. Never give up and practice every day!"



Rosie Bartel

When COVID first hit, Rosie knew that she had to turn to technology to keep from being socially isolated. Before 2020, she had used Zoom to do virtual presentations for her job as a patient advisor, so she was comfortable connecting with others online. Last year, she reached out to online patient advisory groups and friends to create virtual coffee chats, book clubs and other activities that kept everyone safe and in touch. Rosie even made new online friends who share her interests.

Rosie says that technology, like smartphones and computers, helps her stay social. She believes anyone can learn how to use these tools, and you can always ask others to help you.

Rosie's Words of Wisdom: "Reach out to others you know who might feel isolated and start chatting. Look for like-minded people with similar interests to support each other and use technology to connect with them."

If you're interested in learning more about virtual meetings on Zoom or Microsoft Teams, TMG has short videos on our website at tmgwisconsin.com/virtual-meetings-made-easy.



LEARN ABOUT AUGMENTATIVE AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION

There are many ways to let your voice be heard. For people who are unable to physically speak, or who have limited verbal skills, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is a wonderful tool to communicate with others.



AAC is assistive technology that uses icons, words and letters to help people communicate. People type what they want to say on the AAC keyboard, and the device will talk for them. Mike Hipple, founder of the

Wisconsin AAC Network, has been using AAC to communicate for over 20 years. Not only has AAC greatly improved Mike's life, but he's seen what it has meant for others, too.

"AAC can be a huge help to people who want to be more independent because they can communicate what they want," says Mike. "They can share their needs, feelings, dreams and hopes for the future. I have been around the AAC community for a long time, and I could tell you many stories about the impact AAC has on the whole family."

Mike is passionate about making sure others who use AAC have the support and education they need. The Network brings people together through family and communicator (people who use AAC) chat club events, a quarterly newsletter, and quarterly meetings for professionals to learn about and support AAC.

Mike hopes the Wisconsin AAC Network helps people of all abilities better understand the importance of AAC and make it more accessible to those who need it to communicate.

"I started the network because we needed it," says Mike. "Back in the day, Wisconsin was one of the leaders in the field of assistive technology and AAC. We are trying our best to be a leader again."

If you're interested in learning more about alternative communication, or connecting with people who use AAC and the family, friends and professionals who support them, be sure to visit the Wisconsin AAC Network's Facebook page at facebook.com/WiAACnetwork.



RESOURCES FOR FINDING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Here are some great resources to find assistive technology that's right for you!

WisTech

WisTech is Wisconsin's assistive technology program. This website is a great place to start your assistive technology journey: dhs.wisconsin.gov/wistech/index.htm

Independent Living Centers (ILCs)

Try it before you buy it! WisTech has partnered with all eight of Wisconsin's ILCs to create the network of Device Loan and Device Demonstration Centers, as well as the WisLoan program. Contact your local ILC to learn where you can try out and buy devices, and find ways to fund them: dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02357.pdf

Wisconsin Assistive Technology for All (AT4ALL)

Curious about what items are available at the Device Loan and Device Demonstration Centers? The Wisconsin AT4ALL website has a list of items to test or borrow at ILCs across the state. If you're interested in finding out more, be sure to visit: wisconsinat4all.com

Talk to your TMG IRIS Consultant about the assistive technology that IRIS may fund to help you meet your goals. These could include:

- Lifts
- Talking alarm clocks
- Smart home devices
- Speech-to-text technology
- Adaptive computer equipment

JOIN TMG'S CITIZEN ADVISORY COUNCILS!

Do you want to be a voice for others and help the TMG IRIS Consultant Agency (ICA) be the best it can be?

We believe:

- **You know self-direction best.**
- **Your experience has tremendous value.**
- **Your guidance will help us improve.**

Applications accepted online through February 4, 2022.

We're currently taking applications to join our Citizen Advisory Councils. We are looking for people using the TMG ICA, or their guardians, to join.

TMG Citizen Advisory Council members will meet virtually two to three times per year to provide feedback on TMG processes, practices and communications, and advise us on how we can do our best work to support people in self-direction.

Have questions about the councils or interested in joining? Visit tmgwisconsin.com/council to learn more!



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FIND US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

A lot has been happening on TMG's **Facebook**, **LinkedIn** and **Twitter** pages! Have you visited them lately?

There, you can read up on important news and events, learn about others who are living self-determined lives and see what TMG has been up to throughout Wisconsin. Be sure to share your favorite posts and become part of the broader self-determination community in Wisconsin!



For information about the TMG IRIS Consultant Agency, visit: tmgwisconsin.com or facebook.com/TMGWisconsin
Or call our toll-free number: (844) 864-8987