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AAC-RERC Monitors Technology and Policy Developments

by *Tracy Rackensperger*

The Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Communication Enhancement, commonly referred to as the AAC-RERC, positively affects the lives of individuals who have communicative disabilities and rely on augmentative communication. The Center accomplishes this by having a group of individuals from around the country participate in studies, educational activities, and the distribution of information relating to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). The Center is funded by the National Institute on Disability Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) to be responsive to the needs of individuals who rely on AAC technologies.

One of the AAC-RERC objectives over the next five years is to encourage the compatibility of AAC devices with technologies all people use (e.g. computers, cell phones, LCD displays, etc.). To achieve this objective, the Center is currently conducting a project called Technology and Policy Watch. The Tech and Policy Watch Project is being led by Frank DeRuyter (Duke University) along with Kevin Caves (Duke University), Diane Bryen (Temple University), David Beukelman (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), and Howard Shane (Children's Hospital Boston).

The purpose of Tech Watch is to monitor improvements in computer and wireless technology and then determine how these developments could improve augmentative communication devices. The research team will track advances in areas not related specifically to people with disabilities and then investigate how these advances can be used to enhance the lives of people who use augmentative communication. The AAC-RERC will be working with AT&T as well as with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Federal Laboratory Consortium for Technology Transfer to assist in improving communication devices. These organizations will address getting communication devices to:

1. Speak in more natural sounding voices
2. Have voices that can be personalized
3. Have LCD displays that can be used in a variety of lighting situations,
4. Be more compatible with common technology (including improved accessibility of websites)
5. Integrate more with cell phones.

The purpose of the Policy Watch is to monitor policy developments that affect the lives of individuals who use augmentative communication. The Center will be working with the National Committee for Information Technology Standards, the Medicare Implementation Team, and the FCC to move forward these policy issues. These organizations will do the following:

1. Set technology standards to improve overall quality and compatibility of AAC and other technical devices
2. Keep abreast of Medicare policy regarding AAC devices



3. Improve the accessibility of cell phones to those who use augmentative communication.

The focus of the AAC-RERC Tech and Policy Watch project is to assist individuals who use augmentative communication by being actively involved in developments in technology and policy. The project's lead investigator, Frank Deruyter describes the activity as "...a vehicle for the AAC-RERC to be proactive and responsive to emerging issues within the AAC field." He also states, "With the rapid changes in both the technology and policy aspects of the field, this is obviously an important project for managing emerging developments."



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