



Western  
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## **Free and Low-Cost Telecommunication Programs for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons**

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Persons who are deaf or hard of hearing are often eligible to receive free or low-cost telecommunications equipment, services, and training.

Most states offer a Telecommunications Equipment Distribution Program (TEDP) that makes adaptive devices available to deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind persons. TEDPs provide free or low-cost equipment (often in the form of vouchers) to qualified applicants to accommodate their disability and improve phone access.

Eligibility requirements, types of equipment covered, and benefit amounts vary from state to state (and sometimes on the severity of the disability), but most TEDPs are administered along similar lines.

In general, any sensory, physical, or cognitive impairment that impedes telephone use is eligible. Most TEDPs cover multiple disabilities, including persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf and low vision, and deaf-blind.

Most programs require applicants to furnish proof of residency and to document their disability, such as with a signed letter from a physician or state agency. Some states also require proof of residential phone service and set age and/or income restrictions.

Assistive telecommunications technology covers a broad range. One who is hard of hearing might only need an amplified phone or headset. A deaf person might need TTY or captioned telephone.

The types of equipment typically covered in TEDPs include:

- Amplified telephones, handsets, and headsets
- TTY, Voice Carry Over (VCO), and captioned telephones
- TTY phones with braille and large-print displays
- TTY modems and software
- Hands-free speaker telephones
- Auto-dialers
- Telephone ring signalers
- Assistive speech devices
- Specialized and in-home training

### **Sample Plan: Wisconsin Telecommunications Equipment Purchase Program (TEPP)**

Under TEPP, qualified Wisconsin residents receive vouchers. The amounts for each disability category are tiered to address levels of technology necessary for phone access.

Apart from the Hard of Hearing category, applicants pay the first \$100 out of pocket on equipment purchases. Residents who cannot afford the \$100 may be eligible for Wisconsin's Telecommunications Assistance Program (TAP), administered by the Office for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing in the state's Department of Health and Family Services. The TEPP website also includes links to application materials and an approved list of telecommunications vendors.

Visit the Telephone Equipment Distribution Program Association (TEDPA) website and download "State Specialized Telecommunications Equipment Programs" to learn more about programs in your area. TEDPA is a national membership organization that supports telecom distributions programs for persons with disabilities. Its website also provides information and links on vendors, products, and services.

Other sources of information include state public utility or service commissions and agencies that provide services to people with disabilities, especially those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

## **Project Endeavor**

Project Endeavor provides people who are deaf or hard of hearing with free video telecommunications equipment, discounted high-speed Internet access, and training and educational materials. The project aims to narrow the digital divide among persons who are deaf or hard of hearing and promote greater overall broadband adoption throughout the U.S.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration awarded CSD (Communication Service for the Deaf, Inc.) – a voice, text, and video-enabled call support center located in Sioux Falls, SD – a \$14.9 million contract as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Project goals include launching a contact center to enroll qualified individuals, establishing public videophone kiosks in community centers, and providing training to help consumers maximize Internet use.

Project Endeavor is open to American residents (citizens or Green Card holders) age 16 and older who are:

- Deaf or hard of hearing - with bilateral hearing loss of at least 40 decibels
- Unable to access broadband services
- Enrolled in or eligible for at least one of the following public assistance programs:
  - Medicaid
  - Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)
  - Social Security benefits (SSI or SSDI)
  - Federal Public Housing Assistance or Section 8
  - Food Stamps or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
  - Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC)
  - National School Lunch's FREE Lunch Program (NSL)
  - Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
  - Welfare to Work (WTW)
  - Vocational Rehabilitation Client (Active)
  - Transition Plan Student (School to Work or School to Post Secondary).

Project Endeavor especially targets students in transition, vocational rehabilitation clients, low-income individuals, and those currently without high speed Internet access. Applicants must also complete a certification form signed by a licensed

audiologist, physician, social worker, or teacher of the deaf that documents bilateral hearing loss.

## **The Need for Broadband Access**

High-speed Internet connectivity is essential for accessing services that ensure safety and independence. For example, VRS equipment avails consumers of an FCC-assigned, 10-digit number that combines E911 technology with Automatic Location Identification to help VRS providers dispatch emergency services.

In April 2011, CSD expanded its broadband equipment offerings by partnering with The Z, a video relay service (VRS) provider. Qualified applicants can now receive free VRS equipment (including the Z's Z-340 WiFi and Z-Ojo videophones) and discounted broadband services, including 4G/3G wireless and services such as DSL from local cable companies. CSD can also provide financial support to applicants who are required to make a deposit to establish broadband service.

To apply, download an application from the Project Endeavor Contact Center or chat live with an agent. You can also call CSD at 877.638.6377 (voice) or 605.644.7399 or 605.550.4056 (video).

The Project Endeavor website offers educational videos (in ASL, caption, and voice) on the benefits of high-speed Internet.

## **National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program**

In 2012, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) established the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program (mandated by the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act) to support local distribution of accessible communications technology. The FCC promotes the program through the iCanConnect outreach campaign.

The program helps ensure access to tools everyone needs to interact with the world as an involved, contributing member of society, including the nearly one million U.S. residents with combined vision and hearing loss.

Eligible applicants can receive assessments, telecommunications technology, and training – all for free. Eligible equipment must make telecommunications and

advanced digital communications (e.g., instant messaging, online video conferencing, and email) accessible to deaf-blind persons. Solutions can be hardware or software, either separate or in combination, mainstream, or specialized. Depending on funding, programs may also provide warranties, maintenance, and repairs. Eligible equipment includes:

- Screen magnification software
- Braille displays
- Phone amplifiers and TTY devices
- Captioned telephones
- Video phones
- Videoconferencing software
- Adaptable off-the-shelf products

Combined hearing and vision loss must meet standards defined by the Helen Keller National Center, which administers the program with FableVision and Perkins School for the Blind. One's income cannot exceed 400 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. Call 800.825.4595 for more information.

## **Resources:**

Telecommunications Equipment Distribution Programs Offer Free Accessible Phones

<http://assistivetechology.about.com/od/DHHSC1/a/Telecommunications-Equipment-Distribution-Programs-Offer-Free-Accessible-Phones.htm>

Project Endeavor Offers Free Videophones, Broadband Discounts

<http://assistivetechology.about.com/od/DHHSC1/a/Project-Endeavor-Offers-Deaf-Hoh-Free-Videophones-Broadband-Discounts.htm>

Free Communications Technology for Deaf-Blind Persons

<http://assistivetechology.about.com/od/DHHSC1/p/Free-Communications-Technology-For-Deaf-Blind-Persons.htm>