National Leadership Consortium Bulletin

Leading Innovation Through Technology in Disability Services

NATIONAL LEADERSHIP CONSORTIUM
ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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National Leadership Consortium Bulletin

About the Bulletin

The National Leadership Consortium Bulletin is a free, web-based publication dedicated to providing relevant, trustworthy, and thought-provoking information to leaders, practitioners, and people with disabilities and their families involved in the field of developmental disabilities support services. The Bulletin will serve as a bridge between scientific journals and day-to-day leadership, exploring timely research and policy issues in the leadership and disabilities fields with the aim of promoting organizational change and assisting leaders to support people with disabilities to experience inclusive, valuable, and meaningful lives.

About the National Leadership Consortium

Leadership, Values and Vision: Transforming Lives and Organizations

The National Leadership Consortium was founded in 2006 to develop current and future generations of disability sector leaders to have the knowledge, skills, and values needed to transform services and systems to be responsive to the needs, wants, and rights of people with disabilities. Our mission is to provide quality training, technical assistance, and support aimed at the development of values-based leadership in disability sector leaders. The National Leadership Consortium is focused on promoting the rights of people with disabilities to direct their services and lives and to fully belong in their chosen communities. One way the National Leadership Consortium works to meet this mission is through a nationally recognized, intensive leadership development program, the Leadership Institute. These in-person or virtual trainings focus on knowledge, skills, and supports leaders need to transform systems and organizations in the disability service sector.

Contact Us

https://natleadership.org/bulletin • bulletin@natleadership.org

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Contributors:

Caitlin Bailey, PhD, *Co-Director, National Leadership Consortium*
Julie Lasorda, *Director of Marketing and Innovation, Community Living Essex County*
Shelbey Pillon, *Manager of Planning and Technology Support, Community Living Essex County*
Zandam Hussaini, PhD, *Research Analyst, Human Services Research Institute*
Robert Zotynia, *Power Coach, Self Advocates United as One*
Cory Gilden, PhD, *Research and Evaluation Manager, National Leadership Consortium*
Shannon Pociask, *Executive Director, Hope House*
Doug Golub, *Principal Consultant, Data Potato LLC*
Lateef McLeod, *Author and Artist*
Ben Drew, *Founder, Open Future Learning*
Tyler Burke, *Founder and CEO, OMNEAN*
Donald Clark, *Policy and Innovation Program Development Specialist, D.C. Department on Disability Services*
DJ Savarese, *Founder and Facilitator, The Lives-in-Progress Collective*
Kim Elliott, MS, *Director of Programs, Community Vision*
Jennifer Knapp, *Executive Director, Community Vision*
Amanda Rich, PhD, *Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Open Road Inclusive Community Consulting LLC*

Managing Editor: **Cory Gilden, PhD**
Consulting Editor: **Amanda Rich, PhD**

If you would like to contribute a reflection, strategy, position piece, or research to the Bulletin please contact us at bulletin@natleadership.org. Even if you have not written for publication before, the team at the Bulletin would love to help you develop your ideas.

Introduction: Leading Innovation Through Technology in Disability Services

Steve Eidelman, co-founder of NLCDD and a longtime university professor (among several dozen other roles) likes to say that there are tech natives and tech immigrants. Tech natives are those who have grown up in the world of smart phones, tablets, internet connection (i.e., college students on Steve's class rosters, and younger generations of professionals who are entering the workforce). Tech immigrants are those who came of age before the world was fully online, fully connected, and fully able to 'Google' the answers to all of life's questions. Our field seems to be among the latter; for the most part, we're learning, adapting, and adopting as tech evolves and grows.

This issue of the Bulletin explores the opportunities and complexities that come with using technology in the disability service sector, digging into the ethical responsibility of using tech to enable people using supports, rather than control, coerce, or circumvent them. Authors highlight the wonderful things that come with using technology, such as increasing autonomy and control that people have in their lives, and warn about the challenges that come with using technology in place of people.

The issue starts with an article from Julie Lasorda and Shelbey Pillon, who talk about how they use standards of dignity, inclusion, and choice to inform how their organization utilizes technology in services. Zandam Hussaini provides a macro-overview of trends in technology access, inaccessability, and use across the U.S. (using National Core Indicators® data) and Robert Zotynia offers a micro look into how technology impacts his day-to-day life. Next, Cory Gilden discusses the complexities of balancing technology advancements with what is actually needed and wanted by people with disabilities, offering questions for leaders to ask themselves before adopting new tech. The next article from Shannon Pociask exemplifies an ideal balance, sharing how Hope House Foundation has established operational and service-driven practices to utilize technology for good.

The next four articles address specific types and uses for tech; Doug Golub focusing on AI and the opportunities and dangers in our field, Lateef McLeod describing how AAC can help people with disabilities create art, Ben Drew and Tyler Burke sharing about specific tech tools for training and building the skills of field professionals, and Donald Clark honing in on how technology is being used to support people who are aging. DJ Savarese talks about building equity in communication and community using AAC and technology, and Kim Elliot and Jennifer Knapp highlight ways that technology can be used to support people to have more control over their lives. Finally, the issue concludes with a list of resources compiled by Amanda Rich helpful for learning about tech solutions that are applicable to our field.

This is a packed issue, full of great tools and ideas. In reading the articles, I was excited and reassured by the careful and thoughtful way that leaders are using tech in ways that are driven by the interests and goals of people with disabilities.

Hope you enjoy!

Caitlin Bailey

Caitlin Bailey *is the Co-Director of the National Leadership Consortium on Developmental Disabilities. She holds a Ph.D. in Human Development and Family Science. Caitlin is passionate about enhancing leaders' skills and evidence-based practices in our field. Contact Caitlin at cbailey@natleadership.org.*

Integrating Technology at Every Level: From AI in the Workplace to Smart Supports in Daily Life

By Julie Lasorda and Shelbey Pillon

- AI and Smart Support save time and expand options so staff and people can focus on what matters most: human connection.
- Service providers can build confidence through hands-on training, ensuring safe and ethical use of technology.
- Every use of technology should be chosen because it strengthens dignity, independence, and human connection.

At Community Living Essex County (CLEC), we believe innovation isn't just about adopting new tools, it's about reimagining what's possible. Technology, when guided by values of dignity, inclusion, and choice, has the power to transform lives. In recent years, two areas of technology have shaped our journey: the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to transform how our employees work, and Smart Supports that enable people we support to live with greater independence. Together, they reflect how CLEC is weaving technology into the very fabric of our organization — empowering people, strengthening staff, and advancing a vision of a more person-centered future.

Harnessing Artificial Intelligence to Transform How We Work

For us, generative AI is not a fleeting trend, it is a practical, powerful tool that is already changing how we operate. By helping us work smarter, AI frees up more of our energy for what matters most: human connection.

We began with small tasks, like summarizing policies, drafting clearer communications, and analyzing survey data, and quickly saw results. Today, AI helps us:

- Streamline tasks like drafting communications and training materials
- Enhance decision making by analyzing large data sets to identify patterns
- Spark creativity in campaigns, events, and problem-solving sessions
- Advance accessibility by producing plain language and alternate format documents

Each application gives staff back precious time to focus directly on people, not paperwork.

We knew early on that technology adoption would rise or fall on employee confidence. That's why we created AI Labs — hands-on workshops where staff safely explore AI tools, learn ethical practices, and try real-world scenarios. What started with hesitation has grown into enthusiasm, with employees themselves suggesting new ways AI can enhance their work. Our guiding question is always: *Just because something can be done with AI, should it be?* We only pursue projects that improve quality of life, increase person-centeredness, and create more space for human relationships. By holding fast to these values, AI stays in its rightful place — a tool to amplify, not replace, the human touch.

Embracing Technology as a Tool to Support People in Reaching Their Goals

CLEC is a non-profit, charitable organization dedicated to advancing inclusion and quality of life for people with intellectual disabilities. Guided by our vision of a community where everyone is respected, valued, and empowered, we provide a wide range of supports, from 24-hour living to employment and person-directed planning. In 2015, CLEC launched the Smart Support Technology Enabled Services Project to reimagine how supports could be delivered. The goal was bold: increase independence and choice for people while addressing system-wide challenges like staffing shortages.

Through smart home devices, mobile apps, and remote support systems, Smart Support has reshaped planning and service delivery. Technology is no longer an afterthought - it's a central part of goal setting, risk management, and everyday supports.

Practical Examples

- A person working toward independence may use smart locks, medication reminders, or remote monitoring.
- A person seeking more community involvement may use navigation or communication apps to expand their participation.

Smart Support has been transformative. Technology blends seamlessly with human support, offering personalized, flexible, and scalable solutions. People are living more independently, families have greater peace of mind, and organizations across the sector are watching how this model demonstrates a sustainable path forward. At every level, Smart Support proves that technology can complement, not replace, human connection.

Looking Ahead

AI and Smart Support represent two sides of the same vision: technology that empowers employees and technology that empowers people. By investing in both, CLEC is building a system that is more responsive, innovative, and person-centered.

We believe that the future of developmental services will not be defined by choosing between people or technology — but by how courageously we integrate them. At CLEC, technology doesn't diminish the human touch — it amplifies it.

Julie LaSorda *is the Director of Marketing and Innovation at Community Living Essex County. She holds an Honours Bachelor of Commerce with a minor in Applied Information Technology and a Bachelor of Education from the University of Windsor. Julie is passionate about leveraging technology, communications, and innovation to strengthen organizations and enhance supports for people with intellectual disabilities. Contact Julie at jlasorda@communitylivingessex.org.*

Shelbey Pillon *is the Manager of Planning and Technology Support at Community Living Essex County. She is a graduate of the University of Windsor with an Honours Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and has over 18 years of experience in developmental services. She is passionate about supporting people in achieving their goals and dreams and is particularly interested in how technology can enhance and complement the supports people receive. Shelbey can be reached at spillon@communitylivingessex.org*

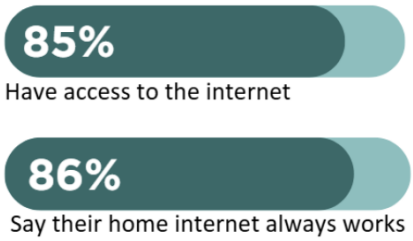
Current Technology Landscape and Opportunities in Developmental Disability Services: Evidence from National Core Indicators® Data

By Zandam Hussaini

- Many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) still face barriers to getting and using technology, even though it can help them live more independently and connect with their communities.
- About 85% of people surveyed have internet access, but access varies by state, and affordability remains a major issue.
- Only 30% use technology in their daily lives, and just 32% say their case managers talk with them about how technology could support their goals.
- More than half of people with IDD have tried have tried telehealth, but only about half enjoy using it, showing the need to improve how technology-based services are offered and supported.

The digital transformation of American society has created unprecedented opportunities for independence, community participation, and service delivery innovation. However, for the estimated 1.2 million Americans with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) receiving disability services, technology access remains uneven and underutilized. The National Core Indicators-Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (NCI-IDD®) In-Person Survey (IPS) examines access to and use of technology in everyday lives of people with IDD. NCI-IDD®, a partnership between Human Services Institute (HSRI) and the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services (NASDDDS), is a national effort to measure and improve the performance of state developmental disabilities service systems. NCI-IDD® IPS is a survey of adults receiving at least one service in addition to case management from their state developmental disabilities service system. The data in this article comes from the 2023-24 IPS and represents 17,585 adults with IDD responding (respondents) from 30 states.

Digital Infrastructure Access and Interstate Disparities



More than four-in-five (85%) survey respondents report having internet access. Lack of internet access could be related to a lack of local internet infrastructure and/or affordability of internet or device access. Internet access varies from state-to-state. Results from Virginia demonstrate that 96% of respondents have internet access, while Oklahoma reaches only 70%, a 26-percentage-point gap. Among those with home internet access across the country, 86% report their internet always works. This finding suggests that the primary challenge appears to be initial access rather than internet service quality, which points towards other issues such as affordability, availability, and possible support needed to obtain internet access when available. This may also have implications for how state DD systems disseminate information to service users and their families. Social media, email and other digital modes may not reach all users and their families in some states due to lack of internet availability and access.

Use technology in their everyday lives to help them do more things on their own

Technology Integration and Independence Outcomes

Almost one-in-three (30%) respondents report using technology in their everyday lives. Among those who use technology, satisfaction is high: 92% report they have enough help to use the technology and devices that help them in everyday life, and 93% know who to talk to if there are problems with their technology. These findings suggest those who use technology feel that they have the support needed.

Healthcare Delivery Transformation

The telehealth data reveals both the promise and limitations of virtual healthcare delivery. Just over half (54%) of respondents have used telehealth services. This figure is quite a bit higher than telehealth use in 2024 among the U.S. adult population (34%). However, just 53% report that they like using telehealth; this represents an opportunity to do further exploration into the use of telehealth services for people with IDD to understand why almost half of the respondents do not like using telehealth for their healthcare.

Service Coordination Technology Opportunities

About one-in-three respondents (32%) report their case managers or service coordinators discuss technology that may help them in their everyday life. People with IDD who receive services from state DD agencies are required to have a person-centered plan. Person-Centered Planning (PCP) is the process used in Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) to make sure supports and services are designed around the person's own goals, choices, and needs. The person-centered planning process, facilitated by case managers or service coordinators, should address the use of technology support that could benefit people in their everyday lives. This finding may represent the opportunity for states to review the requirements for person centered planning ensuring technology supports are addressed on an individual basis and that people have the opportunity for goals to increase the use of technology if so desired. The variation among states in this measure, ranging from Washington D.C.'s 55% to Michigan's 19%, suggests that state-specific person-centered planning requirements, service standards, and quality assurance mechanisms may influence whether technology discussions occur. This finding might resonate with states as they consider state HCBS policy changes and quality improvement initiatives.

What Does It Mean for the Field?

The data reveals that technology access and utilization among people with IDD is not simply a matter of individual preference or capacity and may be an opportunity for policies and programs to enhance technology access and utilization:

- **Federal Policy:** The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) could ensure HCBS regulations address technology access use for people with IDD. Current person-centered planning requirements should be expanded to address understanding and use of technology in people's everyday lives.

- **State Developmental Disability Systems:** State agencies could examine the requirements for person-centered planning to ensure technology use is addressed during the annual planning process. In addition, states could consider requiring case manager, service coordinator, and/or service provider training on the use of technology in the everyday lives of people with IDD. Several state DD agencies adopted Technology First Initiatives efforts to make technology the primary approach for providing support and services to people with IDD, emphasizing independence, dignity, and community inclusion. As of 2023, 43 states had Technology First related initiatives or regulations, and the movement continues to expand.

What Does It Mean for Me?

For people with IDD, families, and advocates, these findings provide both validation of experienced barriers and strategic guidance for policy advocacy and service navigation.

- **Individual Advocacy Strategies:** About 14% of respondents report lacking internet access and 68% report that case managers never discuss technology solutions. People with IDD and their families can work to advocate at the state level to address these gaps through policy reform and service improvement initiatives.
- **System Navigation and Resource Access:** Telehealth services are available for many but may not actively be promoted to eligible people. For healthcare access, the telehealth satisfaction data (53% positive experiences) suggests that remote healthcare can be effective when properly implemented. This presents an opportunity to further explore the use of telehealth by people with IDD to determine opportunities to improve the experience.

Zandam Hussaini *is a Research Analyst at the Human Services Research Institute. Zandam is passionate about use of data to inform disability policy, improve services and advance wellbeing. Contact Zandam at zhussaini@hsri.org.*

How Technology Helped Me Create a Meaningful Life

By Robert Zotynia

- Technology does not have to be advanced or expensive to be useful.
- Always presume competence of people with IDD.
- Technology can help you create a meaningful life.

My name is Robert Zotynia. I am a 38-year-old artist and advocate. I work for Self-Advocates United as One (SAU1) as a Power Coach and consult with Values Into Action as the co-coordinator for the True Friendships Project. I am the Common Law Employer for my self-directed services funded through a Pennsylvania Medicaid waiver. I have cerebral palsy and am a non-traditional communicator. I use a power wheelchair for mobility and a variety of applications to communicate.

When I think about technological advances throughout my lifetime, it takes me back to my school days. I was introduced to my first communication device when I was nine years old. It was big, bulky, and expensive. There were several phrases programmed in it so I could ask and answer questions. I had a switch-activated device that allowed me to operate a blender. This was also big and bulky. I had an adaptive keyboard with large keys so I could participate in computer class alongside my peers. I learned to type my name and use the electronic calculator. I was surrounded by therapists who helped me navigate the different types of technology and elevate what made sense for me.

After I graduated, I fell off the proverbial cliff. No more therapist to assist me, I was on my own and needed to figure out what to do with the rest of my life. I knew I wanted to find work, but for a person with significant physical and communication challenges that's not always easy.

I started exploring how I could use generic, off-the-shelf technology to build a meaningful life. My mom helped me use person centered planning tools to make lists of things I am interested in exploring.

I knew I liked music but was always dependent on others to pick radio stations for me to listen to. We purchased an Alexa and programmed it so I can ask her to play my favorite music. I have a tablet with an app that's programmed for me to ask questions, such as "Alexa, play Bruce Springsteen." I also subscribe to several streaming apps that are all linked to my Alexa.

I knew I was interested in creating art but struggled to find a way to express myself on canvas. Holding a paint brush is hard for me, but I discovered extra wide brush handles are much easier. Technology doesn't always have to be high tech — low tech options can also be incredibly helpful for many people. Last year, I joined a group of local artists for my first official art show. I displayed three paintings, all created using my adaptive tools, and sold out!

Finding a job was of course on the list because, like most people, I want to be as financially independent as possible. When I heard about the open position at SAU1, I knew it was a perfect fit. As a life-long advocate for people with disabilities, it was a dream come true to find a way to earn an income doing what I love best — helping others, like me, learn about their rights and how to #SpeakUP. I use an app called Natural Reader to program my comments so when I'm facilitating learning sessions I can "speak" to the attendees.

This is a great app. It's cloud-based, so if my device fails for any reason, I can grab another and keep going as long as I have an internet connection.

I wanted to stay connected with my friends and family. I mostly use social media for this, posting updates about my life. I also have a Zoom account, so I can talk to people. During the pandemic, when the world turned upside down, I hosted a Zoom call for my family to be together on Easter. We had relatives from multiple states join and it was so much fun.

When I need to get around town I have a van that is modified to accommodate my power wheelchair. All we need to do is press a button and the side door opens, the ramp drops down, and I drive right in! Press the button again and the door closes. I purchased the van with help from my family, but the modifications were paid for with Medicaid waiver funds.

I am fortunate that I live in a state that embraces technology and vehicle modifications in the waiver. Check with your state to see if these options are available, and if not, advocate for them! Access to affordable technology is a life saver for me and should be available to everyone.

Technology has allowed me to take control of my self-directed services and become a Common Law Employer. This means, my support staff work for me, I am responsible for recruiting, hiring, managing, and approving their timesheets. I do all of this on my laptop or through an app installed on my smartphone.

In closing, I just want to remind you that just because a person doesn't walk or talk doesn't mean they can think and have contribute to their communities. Always remember to presume competence, never do *for* and always do *with* a person with disabilities. We have a lot to contribute, and thanks to advances in technology, we're claiming our place in the world.

Robert Zotynia *is a 38-year-old artist, self-advocate, and change-maker. He is employed by Self Advocates United as a Power Coach and Values Into Action as a self-advocate advisor. He co-chairs Values Into Action's Authentic Friendships Project and previously chaired the Housing Demonstration Project. He has presented at numerous conferences and workshops. He is a member of The Alliance for Citizen Directed Supports, The Arc, and holds a certificate of completion from Amnesty International in Human Rights: The Right to Freedom of Expression. Contact Robert at rzotynia@gmail.com*

Balancing Innovation and Dignity: Technology Considerations in the Disability Field

By Cory Gilden

- Service providers using technology in supports should consider, with the people they support, if that technology is necessary and right for the person using it.
- Service providers using technology should train their employees on how and when to use technology.
- There are a lot of things related to privacy, like the dignity of the person using the technology, the security of the information, and getting consent from the person using the technology, that service providers need to think about before using technology.

Technology has transformed the landscape of disability services, from telehealth visits and virtual services to smart-home devices and remote monitoring systems. These innovations can promote independence, access, and connection, but they also bring new concerns for service providers. For technology to enhance quality of life rather than complicate it, professionals should be aware of potential risks and stay attentive to issues of equity, accessibility, privacy, dignity, and professional boundaries.

Equity of Access

Without adequate support, technology can widen the digital divide rather than close it. Not all people with disabilities have equal access to devices and accessibility tools, reliable internet, technical support, or financial resources to sustain technology use. Even when access exists, digital literacy varies widely. Service providers should avoid assumptions and instead assess each person's comfort level and training needs, as well as the comfort and training of their support professionals and family, who may be providing technical support. Providers can look into resource centers that lend equipment for testing to find the right fit, like the University of Delaware's Delaware Assistive Technology Initiative (DATI), or ones that can provide assistance for accessible technology, like Virginia's Assistance Technology Loan Fund Authority. Providers should ask themselves: *Does the person have the equipment, internet access, and training needed to benefit from this technology?*

Accessibility and Usability

Many platforms and apps are not designed with accessibility in mind, leading to barriers for people who use screen readers, have low vision, experience hearing differences, or rely on alternative input methods. Providers should evaluate tools against accessibility standards, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) and involve people with disabilities in testing new systems. Providers should ask themselves: *Is the tool compatible with assistive devices and designed inclusively?*

Privacy

Digital service delivery often involves sensitive personal information. Professionals should ensure that platforms meet data security standards while also communicating clearly with people about what information is being collected and how it will be used. Equally important is respecting autonomy. People should have a choice to engage with technology-based services or in-person alternatives. Consent should be ongoing and revisited regularly as technology or circumstances change.

Video and monitoring equipment in homes is one of the most sensitive issues for privacy. While technological tools can be introduced to promote safety, they can also feel like surveillance in what should be a private, dignified space. Key considerations include:

- **Privacy**: Bedrooms and bathrooms should never be monitored. Even in common areas, residents should know when and where cameras are in use.
- **Consent**: Residents must be involved in decisions, with the right to refuse whenever possible. Providers should ask themselves: *Has the person (and their guardian, if applicable) been fully informed and involved in the decision?* Consent should be revisited regularly.
- **Alternatives**: Before turning to cameras, explore less invasive supports such as motion sensors and other triggered devices, like pressure sensing mats. Providers should ask themselves: *Could the same goal be achieved with a less intrusive option?*
- **Data Security**: Recorded footage must be stored securely, with clear rules for access and retention. Providers should ask themselves: *How is data stored, who has access, and for how long?*
- **Home Culture**: Technology should never replace human interaction or create an atmosphere of mistrust.

Providers can use this simple guiding principle: *Does this technology improve the person's quality of life, or is it primarily serving as convenience for the organization?*

Concerns for Professionals Using Technology

Service providers themselves increasingly rely on technology for communication, documentation, and service facilitation. Agencies should establish clear policies, training, and feedback loops to ensure technology serves people with disabilities, not the other way around. This shift also requires caution:

- **Confidentiality**: Sensitive information must not be shared over unsecured devices, personal email, or messaging apps.
- **Boundaries**: Staff need guidance on separating professional and personal digital interactions. Agencies should have clear policies on how staff communicate with people they support and their families, ensuring that professional relationships remain healthy and respectful. Providers should ask themselves: *What do we need to clarify about technology use to avoid issues in the future?*
- **Over-Reliance**: Tech can streamline assessments, reporting, and data collection, but it may pull attention away from human interaction. For example, staff typing notes on a tablet during a session might unintentionally reduce engagement with the person in front of them. Typing notes on a tablet may save time, but it should not compromise genuine human connection. Professionals should balance efficiency with presence, making sure technology supports relationship-centered practice.

- **Bias**: Assessment tools and digital platforms may reinforce inequities if they are not designed with accessibility and cultural responsiveness in mind. Providers should ask themselves: *What assumptions does this platform make and is it appropriate for the person using them?*
- **Training**: Ongoing professional development is essential not just to operate tools but to understand how to integrate them ethically and effectively into service delivery. For example, employees should be trained on security practices such as password protection, two-factor authentication, and not leaving devices unattended. Providers should ask themselves: *Are staff trained, supported, and guided by clear policies on ethical use?*
- **Legal Considerations:** State and federal regulations may limit or restrict the use of cameras in residential settings. Similarly, cloud storage and third-party platforms need to be vetted for HIPAA (in the U.S.) or other relevant privacy law compliance. Providers should always verify compliance with licensing requirements, disability rights protections, and privacy laws.
- **Ongoing Adaptation:** The pace of technological change means that what is accessible today may not be tomorrow. Service providers should stay informed about emerging tools, legal requirements, and best practices in digital accessibility. They should also be open to feedback from people with disabilities, families, and direct support staff, recognizing that lived experience is the best guide for responsive and ethical practice.

More Resources About Technology Use Considerations:

- **A Primer on Surveillance Issues in the Disability Community** (from Team Community): Advocacy-focused overview of risks and rights.
- **NDIS Surveillance Technology Practice Guide** (from NDIS in Australia): Practical guidance on using monitoring technology ethically and legally in disability services.
- **ODP Announcement 21-090** (from Pennsylvania DHS): State-level policy on assistive tech and remote supports in residential settings.
- **Minnesota DHS Support Technology and Service Planning** (from Minnesota DHS)**:** FAQs and decision-making tools for integrating tech into person-centered plans.
- **Ethical and Practical Concerns of Surveillance Technologies** (from Niemeijer et al., 2010): Academic review on privacy, dignity, and ethics in monitoring.

Maintaining Human Connection

Technology should be an additional tool for, not a replacement of, meaningful relationships and quality care. Efficiency and convenience should never come at the cost of trust, choice, or dignity. The most successful integrations of technology in disability services are those that expand opportunities while centering people's preferences and rights.

Cory Gilden *is the Research and Evaluation Manager of the National Leadership Consortium on Developmental Disabilities. Cory holds a Ph.D. in Urban Affairs and Public Policy and works with local and national organizations, conducting research and advocating for people with disabilities and their families. Contact Cory at cgilden@natleadership.org.*

Innovation Spotlight Q&A: How Hope House Foundation Uses Technology

By Shannon Pociask

- Technology helps people with disabilities live with more dignity, privacy, and control over their lives, using tools like smart speakers, tablets, and apps.
- Make sure technology fits each person's needs, with teams that test and support new ideas.
- Strong leadership and teamwork make it all work, with staff and partners helping bring new tools to life.

Q: Can you describe Hope House Foundation and your role there?

A: Hope House Foundation is based in Norfolk, Virginia, and we support adults with developmental disabilities to live in their own homes. Our mission is rooted in the belief that people with disabilities *are people* and should direct their own lives. I've been with Hope House since 2003, as a leader of teams of Direct Support Professionals, and moved into the Executive Director role three years ago. Over the years, I have seen firsthand how innovation can transform lives. I was supported in questions I asked and ideas I shared. There were like-minded people who joined the efforts of seeing what technology could do. That support and culture made all the difference.

Q: What inspired your focus on technology?

A: My focus on technology was personally inspired, and I questioned everything about the limited and old technology items available for employees and people supported. While the Hope House service model has always been progressive, our technology was stuck in the past. Leaders before me knew that technology could help people live on their own terms, so they started small with things like clap-on lights, 'as seen on TV' gadgets, keyless locks, and large-number phones. We were using pagers and dial-up internet long after smartphones and Wi-Fi became standard. The biggest barrier was funding — our Medicaid-based revenue didn't allow for much investment in technology. Early efforts to access state assistive technology funds were met with barriers: long waitlists, outdated approved devices, and a system that viewed modern tools like iPads with communication applications as extravagant.

Determined to break through, I was a key leader and designer of an agency Technology First strategic plan. We began to look at organizational needs and upgraded from paper systems to electronic platforms. We supported people using their own funds and were awarded some grant funds to financially support the purchase of tablets, smart phones, Google/Alexa devices. We were able to begin exploring smart home devices and adaptive tools that could make everyday tasks safer and easier.

The pandemic was a turning point. Suddenly, remote connections and safety became urgent. More people supported began requesting tablets and smartphones, and we responded quickly. We expanded access to smart devices and remote support tools, helping people stay connected and manage their routines that made sense for the person. It was a big leap forward.

Q: What makes your approach to technology innovative and what impact do you hope this focus will have?

A: As time goes on, more people we support are younger adults who grew up with everyday technology like smartphones, smart devices, and accessing most things through apps. If you have a need, there is probably an app for that! A person shouldn't have to step backward when they enter adulthood because the service system is outdated and a person shouldn't be limited from possibilities because they don't have access to everyday technology. We want to show that with the right support and tools, the freedom to be you is possible.

We think of accessibility in broader terms now, what we call *21st Century Accessibility*. Accessibility isn't just about ramps and grab bars anymore. It's about smart-home technology, universal design, and digital tools that make life easier and safer. For example:

- Smart-home devices like Google Home allow people to control lights, appliances, and doors with their voice.
- Communication tools such as tablets and apps help people connect with loved ones, attend classes, and advocate for themselves.
- Custom-built applications streamline internal operations, from documenting services to tracking incidents, so staff can spend more time supporting people and less time on paperwork.

These tools aren't luxuries, they're essential. They give people dignity, privacy, and control over their lives.

Q: How does technology support your mission and values?

A: Everything we do is about increasing choice while balancing health and safety. Technology helps us do that. We've always explored assistive technology and home modifications, and now we're embedding technology into every layer of support. Technology is a part of our agency's planning and decision making as it is ever changing. We must remain vigilant in remaining current with everyday technology that can continue to meet needs. We are currently in year three of three of our agency's strategic plan with the priority of universal access to move services from the outdated minimum state requirements and into the 21st century. That means we are making technology available for people we employ and support to support people the best way people live in today's world.

Q: Is there a specific technology you're most excited about?

A: Honestly, there's no single device. What we've learned is that technology is a tool — and the right tool depends on the person and the barrier they're facing. Simply providing a technology item often leads to it being unused, forgotten in a drawer, or malfunctioning. True success requires intentional focus, consistent attention, and ongoing follow-up to understand how changes in support are working. That's why we created an Engagement Team to assess, test, and develop support plans with DSPs and the people we support. It's not about handing someone a tablet and walking away. It's about thoughtful integration, ongoing support, and making sure the technology actually works for them.

Q: Can you share examples of how tech has improved your operations and services?

A: Absolutely! Here are a few:

- **3D Printing**: Our local library has a 3D printer. People supported work with a team member and use a community resource to test different ideas. One person has designed multiple covers for her power wheelchair controller that provides her better comfort and control along with holders for her purse, cell phone, and cups.
- **Lending Library**: Grant funds allowed us to buy devices people can try before committing. People are able to test cooking tools, Apple or Samsung products, and Alexa or Google devices. It's a great way to empower both people with IDD and staff with learning and testing together.
- **Everyday Technology**: It starts with an email and every person we support has their own. This became necessary when almost everything requires a personal email and verification codes for things like smart watches, Ring doorbells, and Alexa displays for health tracking, safety, video calls and calendar reminders. Incorporating the use of these items in the training for employees and support plans for those we support has made all the difference.

Q: What advice would you give to other organizations?

A: Leadership matters. You need leaders who believe in technology, employees who are trained to use it, and a culture that embraces change. Partnerships are also key — we've worked with advocates, funders, and technology experts to bring new ideas to life. Our message is simple: **don't wait**. Explore what's possible. Look beyond traditional assistive technology and consider how everyday tools can make a big difference.

At Hope House, we love technology because it helps us do what we've always done: push boundaries, challenge assumptions, and create opportunities for people with disabilities to live full lives. That's what innovation looks like.

Shannon Pociask *is the Executive Director of Hope House, a service provider in Virginia. Shannon has played a leading role in Hope House's positive impact on the lives of people with disabilities and the surrounding community since 2003. She is dedicated to ensuring that Hope House provides the best services in the region, respecting the balance between independence and support, championing informed choice for all. Contact Shannon at spociask@hope-house.org.*

The White House AI Action Plan: A Call to 'Go and Do,' But Home and Community Based Services Must 'Test and Learn'

By Doug Golub

- AI tools (like smart apps or chatbots) can help people with disabilities communicate, make choices, and be more independent. These tools work best when they are designed together with people with disabilities and used to support human connections, not replace them.
- Service providers (like disability support workers or agencies) can use Generative AI to help write reports or create easy-to-read materials. This can give workers more time to spend in person with the people they support.
- It's important to use AI safely and responsibly. This means having humans review what AI does, getting informed consent, keeping personal information private and secure, and making sure AI is fair and free from bias.

Almost three years ago, the release of ChatGPT's GPT-3.5 model sparked today's Generative AI boom, bringing both enormous possibilities and serious risks. Around the same time, the White House introduced the *Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights* with five guiding principles: safe and effective systems, protections against discrimination, data privacy, notice and explanation, and human alternatives. In 2025, federal policy shifted with *the White House's AI Action Plan*, signaling a pivot from caution to acceleration and sending a message to "go and do."

For Home and Community Based Services (HCBS), which support people with disabilities to live meaningful lives of their choice, in their communities, this directive means AI guidance will happen more locally. States and providers must adopt a "test and learn" strategy, as federal guidance will likely be less prescriptive than the trend at the start of the AI boom. The opportunities for what we can do with Generative AI could touch the most personal aspects of life: choice, voice, independence, rights, privacy, and self-determination, to name a few. AI implementation demands transparency, careful testing, and above all, the leadership of people with lived experience. This moment calls on the disability community to bridge the gap between technological hype and person-centered, values-driven leadership, ensuring AI advances inclusion, choice, and meaningful lives rather than creating barriers.

AI in Supports and Accessibility: Opportunities and Challenges

AI is already reshaping accessibility and the ways people receive supports. AI-powered communication tools like speech-to-text and predictive text technologies now help people who communicate in diverse ways, whether through spoken language, assistive devices, or other modes, engage in conversations more quickly and intuitively. Some devices and apps can adapt their user experiences to match an person's communication style, opening doors for greater independence and self-determination.

Voice-activated assistants, smart home systems, and telehealth agents can remind people to take medication, provide step-by-step support with daily routines, or send alerts to a person, their staff,

family, or other designees, when support may be needed. These tools, when designed with accessibility in mind, promote independence and in some situations, can reduce reliance on staff oversight.

One of the most pressing risks in using AI is algorithmic bias. AI models are often trained on wide-ranging data, from scholarly research to social media, but if these sources exclude or misrepresent people with disabilities, the results can reinforce harmful assumptions or limit opportunities. For example, when we ask a tool to recommend housing or skill-building supports for a person, it should adapt to expand possibilities, not automatically narrow options based on a physical, intellectual, or communication-related disability.

AI must never replace human relationships. Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) bring empathy and lived experience that cannot be automated, so technology should always augment, not substitute, their role. At the same time, privacy and consent must be safeguarded, with clear explanations of how data is collected and used.

AI and Technology for Quality, Paperwork, and Streamlining

The DSP workforce is increasingly stretched, with no shortage of documentation requirements that divert time from the face-to-face purpose of service delivery. Generative AI tools can already help write better progress notes, summarize policies, and create plain-language materials. These tools can reclaim precious time for staff to focus on face-to-face engagement. By analyzing thousands of service records, AI Large Language Model systems can identify patterns that humans may miss, such as increases in falls, gaps in follow-up, or opportunities for earlier interventions. This allows providers to move from reactive compliance toward proactive quality management. Chatbots and decision-support tools are also emerging that help people navigate complex Medicaid and State Plan systems in plain language, reducing errors and preventing coverage gaps that disrupt essential supports

AI is not always accurate; it can "hallucinate" or fabricate information, so every output must be reviewed by a trained professional before being used in records or decisions, also known as "human-in-the-loop" (HIL). Vendors must be carefully vetted, since poorly designed or configured third-party AI tools can create risks to privacy, HIPAA compliance, and bias. "Open models democratize access and foster innovation but also pose risks if used maliciously. The security offered by closed models contrasts with their opacity, making it hard for third parties to inspect and mitigate biases." It is important that staff are trained to follow agency acceptable use policies on the use of open vs. closed models and not to share protected health information with a large language model that is unsafe, public, or where sharing is not permissible per policy. Finally, there is a risk of inequity: smaller providers without robust IT budgets may struggle to access these tools, widening gaps in disparities in service quality between providers.

Moving Forward: A "Test and Learn" Roadmap

"Test and learn" means starting with small pilots for well-defined and controlled use cases, perhaps one tool that supports communication and one that streamlines specific administrative tasks. Each pilot should have clear goals, updated use policies, ethical safeguards, and strong involvement from people with lived experience of disability.

Anchoring these efforts in the principles of the AI Bill of Rights helps establish a baseline for safety, fairness, and consent in addition to leading risk management frameworks (RMFs). Training staff to understand both the power and the limitations of AI is essential, ensuring that human professionals always oversee technology. Most importantly, people with disabilities themselves must guide decisions about which tools to try, how they are evaluated, and whether they truly improve autonomy and quality of life.

By adopting this approach, HCBS providers can meet the AI momentum with responsibility, ethics, and safety. The goal is not just efficiency; it is equity, dignity, and empowerment. If we "test and learn," AI has the potential to reduce barriers, strengthen supports, and free up time for what matters most: building inclusive, person-centered lives. In doing so, we advance best practices in services and systems transformation, ensuring leaders harness innovation to uphold rights, foster belonging, and promote meaningful lives for people with disabilities.

Doug Golub *is the Principal Consultant at Data Potato LLC and a Doctor of Public Health (DrPH) student at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. While earning his Master of Science at Rochester Institute of Technology, he worked as a direct support professional, an experience that shaped his career in human services and innovation. He co-founded MediSked, a pioneering electronic records company for home and community-based services, which was acquired after 20 years of impact. Doug has also held leadership roles at Microsoft's Health Solutions Group and is a nationally recognized thought leader on data, equity, and innovation. He serves on the boards of the ANCOR Foundation and FREE of Maryland. Contact Doug at douggolub@gmail.com.*

AAC and Art: An Essay on AAC and Creativity

By Lateef McLeod

- Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) can be used for creative expression as well as everyday communication.
- ACC can be helpful when writing poetry, writing songs, and creating podcasts.

When people think of Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC), they usually think of Speech Generative Devices (SGDs), like the one Dr. Stephen Hawkins had that spoke robotically for him. However, the general public doesn't typically correlate AAC with creativity and artistic expression. As a black man with cerebral palsy who uses AAC, I have been a poet and a writer almost all my life. I work and dwell where AAC and creativity intersect. I often use my AAC in my artistic expression to illustrate my creativity and individuality in a way that will entice and entertain my audience.

I often start writing poetry on my AAC device or iPad, completing a rough draft before transferring it to my laptop so I can edit and revise the poems. I appreciate the freedom that using my AAC system provides, as it's always with me, allowing me to write anywhere. This AAC setup allows me to immediately transfer an idea and put it in a document before I forget it. Further, once I've completed one of my poems, I can then store it on my AAC system so I can recite and perform it at a spoken word event or as part of a presentation. It helps that now voices on AAC systems sound more natural and less robotic, which enhances the effectiveness of my performance. With my style and the effectiveness of my poetic words, I am able to electrify and inform the audiences I perform for.

As an extension of my artistry, I partnered with the radio show, *Making Contact*, as a Community Story-Making Fellow. For the fellowship, I created an episode for their show on voice recognition in 2014. For the episode, I explained how I use AAC to communicate in my daily life. Additionally, I interviewed my colleagues, Dr. Bob Segalman and April Bryant, who also communicate with AAC to present their perspective. I also interviewed one of my mentors, Dr. Sarah Blackstone, on the earlier history of AAC, and my long-time friend and collaborator, Dr. Samuel Sennott, about how AAC voices were being developed to be more natural. A highlight of participating in this project was recording a song I wrote that was inspired by Notorious B.I.G.'s "The Ten Crack Commandments," which I entitled "The Ten AAC Commandments." In the song, I list ten rules that I have found to be the most valuable when using an AAC device.

Participating in *Making Contact's* fellowship sparked my interest in producing audio recordings for public consumption. I eventually started a podcast with three friends of mine, Leroy Moore, Keith Jones, and Ottis Smith, entitled *Black Disabled Men Talk.* On the podcast, we discussed topics around politics and culture from the perspective of black disabled men. I was the primary person producing the episodes. Part of the production included making sure everything was uploaded correctly to the internet. I am very pleased with the episodes we generated. On the podcast, I showcased my skills as

a black intellectual who uses AAC to carry out political and cultural analysis. After a few years, our original podcast group disbanded. However, at present, both Leroy Moore and I have assembled a new group of black disabled men to continue recording podcast episodes. We are excited about the latest developments for the show.

I am fortunate to be able to use AAC in my artistic endeavors. Whether it is writing and performing poetry or recording podcast episodes, the use of AAC is a core part of all my creative projects. As a writer uses a pen, I use AAC to write my own poems and stories about what I want to see in the world.

Lateef McLeod *is building his career as a writer and a scholar. He recently was a community research associate at Oregon Health and Science University in their University Center in Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. He has earned a BA in English from UC Berkeley and an MFA in Creative Writing from Mills College. He also recently obtained his doctorate from the Anthropology and Social Change doctoral program at California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco graduating at the end of last year. He published his first poetry book, entitled A Declaration of A Body Of Love, in 2010 chronicling his life as a black man with a disability. He also published another poetry book, entitled Whispers of Krip Love, Shouts of Krip Revolution, in 2020. He co-authored another book of poetry called Studies in Brotherly Love in 2021. He currently is writing a novel tentatively entitled The Third Eye Is Crying. He was in the 2007, 2016, 2020, and 2024 annual theater performances of Sins Invalid and also in their artist-in-residence performance in 2011 entitled Residence Alien. In 2019 he started a podcast entitled Black Disabled Men Talk. The podcast website is www.Blackdisabledmentalk.com. In 2022 he was an award recipient of the Wynn Newhouse Award for his long career as a disabled artist. More of his writings are available on his website Lateefhmcleod.com.*

Technology Platforms Spotlight

*Technology is playing a growing role in the disability field to support staff training, improve quality of services, support autonomy, and ultimately enhance the lives of people with IDD. Two innovative platforms, **Open Future Learning** and **OMNEAN**, take different but complementary approaches to workforce development and service delivery. Platforms such as these highlight how technology, when used with care and intention, can be a catalyst for stronger teams, better care, and lasting improvements in the disability service system.*

- **Open Future Learning** gives direct support professionals access to high-quality, disability-specific training anytime and anywhere. It combines online learning with in-person discussions to help staff turn ideas into real, positive changes in people's lives.
- **OMNEAN** works to make mandatory training more meaningful and engaging. Its courses teach important skills like CPR, First Aid, and trauma-informed care in clear, practical ways.
- Both platforms use technology to make training easier to access and more effective, while still valuing relationships and hands-on support.
- When used thoughtfully, technology such as these and others can help staff grow their skills, improve services, and better support people with disabilities.

Open Future Learning

By Ben Drew

Open Future Learning was created to make high-quality, developmental disability specific training available to every direct support professional, no matter where they are, what shift they work, or what budget constraints their organization faces. From the beginning, we wanted staff to learn directly from the most respected and innovative thinkers in the developmental disability field. For too long the thinking, values, and vision of leading advocates like Dave Hingsburger, Beth Mount, David Pitonyak, Lynne Seagle and many others were locked away in conferences or books.

Our platform isn't just a library of content, it's a tool, with intentional and interactive features that help you to blend online learning with in-person conversations. This combination turns ideas into practice to positively impact the lives of those you support.

One concern we have about the use of technology in our field is when organizations want to remove the human connection and supervision piece entirely. Online learning is powerful, but without conversation, reflection, and follow-up, it risks becoming just another box to tick rather than a catalyst for change.

With Open Future, organizations can easily set up users, group them by role or service, schedule learning, and track progress through our admin dashboard. Staff can learn at their own pace, but with clear expectations and in-person follow-up. Our reflective action planning document helps to connect learning so that the training directly connects to the lives of those supported. For larger teams, coordinating access so everyone completes the same module before meeting together, builds shared understanding and collective momentum. And with a six-month follow-up built into our framework, learning doesn't fade – it deepens.

Technology in our field must never replace relationships. When used well, it strengthens them, by putting the wisdom of leading voices into the hands of every direct support professional, and by sparking the kinds of conversations that lead to lasting change.

Learn more about Open Future Learning at www.openfuturelearning.org

OMNEAN

By Tyler Burke

OMNEAN was created because "mandatory training" should be more than mandatory yawning. Seriously, OMNEAN was created to raise the bar for workforce training in intellectual and developmental disability services. Our aim is to deliver modern, engaging learning that meets each state's training requirements while also extending beyond the minimum. For example, we recently launched the American Direct Support Safety Standards, a CPR and First Aid curriculum designed for those supporting people with IDD, physical disabilities, and aging adults. This course complies with current American Heart Association (AHA) guidelines and includes the Fatal Five: dehydration, aspiration, constipation, seizures, and sepsis, recognizing changes from baseline, fall prevention, and more.

Our courses integrate advanced concepts and trauma-informed practices, translated into practical, everyday applications for Direct Support Professionals and providers. We design content to be clear, current, and usable, delivered in short, single competency lessons with examples from real settings and tools that reinforce transfer to practice. In short, OMNEAN combines compliance with meaningful learning, so teams build skills that improve people's lives, not just satisfy a checklist.

My primary concern about advancing technology is resistance to change, especially when policy and regulation lag behind what evidence and tools now allow. When rules are written for older processes, organizations hesitate to adopt better methods, even when they could enhance safety, equity, and efficiency. On the ground, technology hesitancy is real too: limited budgets, turnover, and competing priorities make implementation difficult. Without thoughtful change management, strong data safeguards, and ongoing coaching, tools can become another task rather than genuine support. We need policies and leadership that invite responsible innovation and make adoption practical for frontline teams. Let's get out in front of emerging technology and be strategic in its application, rather than waiting until the last minute when it feels like just another compliance requirement.

What excites me most, especially about AI (OMNEAN.ai is currently in beta testing) is its capacity to empower families, DSPs, and providers. Well-designed tools can expand thinking, reduce administrative burden, and operationalize ethics in the back office. Imagine documentation authoring tools that prompt dignity-first language, automation tools that align with individual preferences, incident reviews that highlight trauma-informed options, and quality dashboards that surface risks early. AI can also assist with onboarding and coaching, offering just-in-time guidance that helps teams apply best practices consistently. Our training platform provides on-the-job access to tutorials so DSPs can stay informed in the moment. When it comes to AI, the goal is not to replace human judgment, but to scaffold it; promoting, empowerment, not replacement. Paired with clear policy and training, technology can help us deliver more truly person-centered, reliable supports.

Learn more about OMNEAN at www.omnean.com

Here are some other platforms to explore:

- Quillo 🌐 www.myquillo.com

  Quillo is a platform for sharing stories, resources, and knowledge for people with disabilities, support staff, and their families.

- Foothold Technology 🌐 https://footholdtechnology.com/

  Foothold Technology is software to support case management and person-centered planning.

- Createability 🌐 https://www.createabilityinc.com/

  Createability can be used to design, develop, and implement innovative enabling technology that supports processes across the entire healthcare continuum to eliminate barriers, foster independence, and empower people with intellectual disabilities and traumatic brain injuries to flourish beyond their current capabilities.

- Ogiso 🌐 https://www.ogiso.io

  Ogiso's platform is designed to reduce the amount of time that direct support professionals and frontline leaders spend filling out paperwork, managing medication, and documenting services so that providers can focus more on providing great supports to people with disabilities.

- Therap 🌐 www.therapservices.net

  Therap's online training uses videos, simulators, and quick guides to help professionals in the disability field learn how to use Therap's tools to document, communicate, and provide quality support for people with disabilities.

Ben Drew *is the Founder of Open Future Learning. He holds a degree in developmental disability nursing from the University of Bournemouth. Ben is passionate about using storytelling and lived experience to transform the way people learn about supporting others. Contact Ben at ben@openfuturelearning.org.*

Tyler Burke *is the Founder/CEO of OMNEAN is a serial Entrepreneur that has started multiple companies with the field of Long-Term Supports and Services over his 25 year career. Tyler is dedicated to using emerging technology and transformative training to help those who support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities create services that empower individuals to live freely, on their own terms, in lives full of meaning and fulfillment. Contact Tyler at tyler@omnean.com.*

Pipeline, Not Patchwork: Tech First Across Disability and Aging

By Donald Clark

- The aging population and people with disabilities can often benefit from the same technology.
- The right technology supports can help improve services and empower people with disabilities.
- There have been many events in the past few years that show that technology is being used more in the disability field.

I didn't know exactly what I was walking into at Consumer Electronic Show (CES) 2023. I did know its affiliate, the Consumer Technology Association (CTA) Foundation, had a clear mission to connect older adults and people with disabilities to technology that brings freedom, independence, and connection. It felt aligned with our Tech First mission: consider technology first as a natural support to strengthen participation, social inclusion, self-determination, and quality of life. That promise is what I held onto as I stepped into the noise of the event for the first time.

The moment I hit the AgeTech Collaborative™ from AARP exhibit, my doubts fell away. It wasn't a token row of booths, instead it felt like a dedicated neighborhood organized around one idea: older adults can age in place and live longer and better, with the right tools. As I peeled back the layers of CES beyond the AgeTech footprint, the intent was even clearer. Accessibility wasn't a side note. Assistive tech was front and center at Eureka Park, the dedicated startup zone full of innovators. The AgeTech Collaborative is one door, but relevant innovation was happening all over the house.

I left that first CES with two things: urgency and direction. Urgency, because the aging community is growing fast and every month we delay, people miss out. Direction, because I could see how these same tools might empower adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) not only sustain independence, but in many cases reach it for the first time and improve quality of life.

Back in D.C., my Program Manager and I turned the feeling into action. We had the D.C. Department on Disability Services (DDS) join the AgeTech Collaborative as a test bed. Not just to "try gadgets," but to learn the ecosystem from the inside and broker pilot opportunities for our local service providers who support people with IDD in the community.

Our first connection through the AgeTech Collaborative was Xandar Kardian. They were eager to learn about the IDD LTSS space, so we introduced them to local rock stars Precious Myers-Brown and Carl Hernandez, then to the innovation leads at St. John's Community Services (SJCS), one of DC's most forward-leaning providers. That introduction turned into a pilot, and the pilot turned into a success story. It validated a core belief I carried out of CES and the AgeTech Collaborative: solutions built first for older adults can be mutually beneficial for adults with IDD if we match them well and implement them with care.

Crystal Thomas, Program Manager of DDS State Office of Policy, Planning and Innovation (SOPPI) and Donald Clark, SOPPI Tech First Lead with an Aeo Care Robot at CES 2023

That story was later spotlighted in 2024 via "BBC Human Component Series," underscoring that "aging tech" and "disability tech" aren't rival lanes — they're overlapping routes to dignity.

All of this sharpened a conviction: aging and disability partners need to move together.

- For older adults, technology often helps sustain what they've built over a lifetime, a home, privacy, routine, safety, social ties.
- For adults with IDD, technology can unlock new levels of independence, autonomy, and quality of life they may have never been to experience.

For both communities, the right tools don't just empower people; they also strengthen the systems that support them by helping service provider organizations amplify staff reach, shifting support from reactive to proactive, and making service delivery more efficient.

Milestones That Reflect the Shift

Since 2023 there have been glimmers of hope reflecting this sentiment. There have been shifts I've seen nationally in this way of thinking:

- 2023-2025 D.C. Disability Tech Summit: DDS annually hosted the event in D.C. to raise the IDD community's and stakeholders' awareness of emerging solutions, featuring CES and AgeTech Collaborative participating companies SingFit, Omcare, Care Daily, Lotus, Cephable, SmartyPans, and Brava to showcase innovations that can expand independence and quality of life for people with IDD.
- 2024 Tennessee merged Aging and Disability: The two departments merged and became the Department of Disability and Aging (DDA), signaling a unified Tech First roadmap.
- 2024 Connecting the Dots Private and Public sectors: I linked NASDDDS to the CTA Foundation and also to the AgeTech Collaborative, opening a national pipeline from aging and disability state systems to innovators.
- 2025 CES crossover recognition: ONSCREEN, Inc. won the CTA Foundation's Digital Health Innovation Challenge Grand Prize. Much of their journey focused on keeping older adults connected, but the win also recognized something we'd been seeing on the ground. The potential and commitment to serving the IDD community too. These signals tell me the market is beginning to see crossover value, not just siloed niches.
- Enabling Technology Engagement Network (ETEN) signals a national push: ADvancing States and NASDDDS launch and co-lead a network to bring policymakers, payers, and tech vendors together to align policy and expand tech adoption across aging and disability LTSS.
- 2025 National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities (NACDD) Tech First: I co-presented with Miranda Hutchinson, Oklahoma DHS Tech First Change Agent, at the Bridging Aging and Disability Network Annual Meeting on Tech First's potential for both communities.
- 2025 HCBS Conference: At the ADvancing States HCBS Conference, a full day intensive was held about enabling technologies for aging and disability; I co-presented and spoke about Tech First, innovation, aging-focused startups, and the crossover potential to empower people with IDD.

Together, these shifts point toward a future where aging and disability systems partner to advance Tech First, where innovation is tested in real homes and services, and where public-private partnerships make enabling tech not the exception but the rule.

CES 2025 CTA Foundation Innovation Challenge, **ONSCREEN, Inc.** *won, earning top honors for its solution designed to empower people with IDD to take control of their healthcare journeys.*

The Plan We Can Act On

Medicaid dollars are strained, providers are asked to do more with less, and DSPs are scarce. And people with disabilities? Too often a care-first culture makes skill building an afterthought, creating dependence instead of equipping people with tools, confidence, and opportunities to lead self-determined lives. We can't hire our way out of this and cannot continue down the traditional path of support; we have to think, support, and partner differently.

Tech First does exactly that-it grows autonomy and self-direction, amplifies staff reach, and has the potential to make service delivery more efficient and cost-effective, even as budgets tighten.

This isn't theoretical. Thirty-nine Developmental Disabilities state agencies are moving from "Novice" to "Expert" to Technology First. This is why the timing is right to make it a pipeline, not a patchwork partnership. Public-private collaboration can be the engine for a promising, underserved market with built-in demand and pathways (LTSS/HCBS) to make the right tools accessible.

What's Next?

I no longer want the IDD community to be an afterthought in innovation. I'm inspired to create a space where we stop waiting to be "discovered" by tech makers and start defining the challenges that matter for lives to thrive in and out of HCBS/LTSS. Then we can nurture innovators to create or adapt solutions that actually address them.

In plain language: take the bull by the horns. Put people first, design carefully, and move together so the benefits win and the risks don't run the show.

This started with a walk across the CES floor. It continues with every person who wants to do more of their life their way and every partner willing to build the ecosystem that makes that possible.

Donald Clark *is the Policy and Innovation Program Development Specialist at the D.C. Department on Disability Services, where he leads the Tech First Initiative. He received the DDS Innovation Award in 2022 and the Dustin A. Wright Tech First Champion Award in 2024. Donald is passionate about expanding independence and quality of life for people with IDD through technology. Contact Donald at donald.clark@dc.gov.*

Toward Equity in Communication: Lessons from a Lifetime with AAC

By DJ Savarese

- AAC and technology offer us a voice and meaningful engagement in different speech-based communities.
- AAC-users are identifying what improvements in technology and AAC are needed.
- Despite clever workarounds that benefit everyone, time, energy, and pacing inequities are still significant.
- Learning and using multiple modes of communication makes communities more communal, more democratic, and more welcoming for everyone.

I have been disrupting the status quo since I was five years old as one of two AAC-using autistics to be fully mainstreamed from kindergarten through college graduation and beyond. I am able to make a living as a writer, filmmaker, presenter, collaborator and activist nationally and internationally. My AAC (Augmentative Alternative Communication) devices have offered me the public voice I needed to exist as an essential member of these speech-based communities.

Technology has also allowed me to meaningfully engage with and even facilitate the creation of new communities: volunteering on boards, such as The Alliance for Citizen Directed Supports and CommunicationFIRST; giving presentations and poetry readings; teaching poetry; co-authoring a chapbook during the pandemic; and bringing different communities of BIPOC leaders with disabilities together as the founder and facilitator of The Lives-in-Progress Collective. I can engage in more of these activities because time is saved when I don't have to travel to every single presentation, reading, or public talk I give.

And improvements in technology and AAC are ongoing. Devices are lighter and less expensive. I've managed to consolidate all my word-based communication and work needs into one smallish device: a MacBook. Even the subtlety and diversity of computer-generated voices is improving (although I've chosen to keep my voice the same throughout the years).

But AAC and technology devices can continue to improve. **Laptops, tablets, and smart phones could have louder voices built into them.** Unless I'm presenting virtually, I have to bring a separate speaker system with me or ensure I can link into whatever sound system exists in that auditorium to amplify my voice. When giving a presentation, **I would like to easily (with one button) break my remarks into separate comments.** Right now, I either rely on someone to highlight the section I want to say aloud, or I have to build pauses into my script and run the entire talk at once, simply changing the slides at the appropriate time. This latter option always sounds rushed, never offering the audience ample time and silent pauses to acknowledge and consider the depth of the disequilibrium my comments intend to create. I also have to navigate back and forth between my script

in a Microsoft Word document and my PowerPoint. This can sometimes lead to my text-to-speech voice failing or to my computer inserting, "You are now screen sharing" in-between some transitions. **PowerPoint should make it easy to simply highlight and speak the text I've put in the notes section for each slide.** And probably most important, the **word prediction feature should be able to learn my nontraditional word choices and phrases**, what audience members and readers sometimes call "DJ-isms." I would love to easily store and call up the specialized vocabulary of a particular subject or theoretical book I'm reading for discussions and public Q and A's and even my own essay writing, making my responses less energy- and time-consuming for me. Instead, word prediction tries to force me into a more generic diction, syntax, and prosody. So, I'm often forced to handwrite my responses (which I do more quickly) and have someone else revoice them for me. Plus, devices are usually generically prerecorded by companies, parents, and teachers, not by us. This means someone else is limiting what we can say. Other AAC users' hopes for the future of AAC can be found in the 2025 Augmentative and Alternative Communication Journal Special Issue: The Power of Collaboration.

Still, the time, energy, and pacing issues are real and significant unless I've prerecorded my responses. And even then, in a group discussion with talkers, unless I always speak first, I need someone who is conscious of how my motor issues impact and affect my conversational style to help me interrupt to share my thoughts out loud.

I have used various strategies to compensate or circumvent the inequitable pacing, particularly in school or board meeting settings, and most have actually benefited the communicative contributions of everyone in the group, including native speakers. For example, in college I asked professors to offer reading discussion questions and paper topics in the syllabus. Then, I used to be the first one to present in classes or to offer answers to discussion prompts. My responses were concise, articulate, well-prepared, and thought out, which set the tone or bar higher for speakers' subsequent contributions.

I also run board meetings quite differently. I begin with the agenda items and leave the socializing and chitchat for the end. Those with the time and energy to stay can stay and those who are done are free to leave. Slowing everyone down is helpful both for processing what's being said and for considering the impact of one another's words.

Another way I compensate is by asking people to smile and wait expectantly. The weight of my words hangs in the silence preceding my remarks. It can be frustrating or infuriating if speaking people are impatient and either try to finish our sentences for us or are talking without acknowledging that we are in the process of saying something.

Despite the workarounds, a very real power disparity between AAC-users and vocal chord-users persists. First of all, the extra effort (time and energy) of producing speech falls solely on our shoulders, asking nothing of nondisabled speakers and hearers, and prerecording our comments tends to disguise the extra time and energy required of us. Second, our society privileges speech above multimodal forms of communication, such as ASL, photos, picture icons, and Protactile, forms of communication that eliminate or minimize the power inequities as we learn them *alongside* our parents, teachers, classmates and friends.

Some of my speaking friends try minimizing the disparity by typing in the chat. Some discover it's easier for them to open up in silent text. Others realize committing their thoughts and words to print involves a greater commitment, ownership, and permanence than simply opening one's mouth to fleetingly speak and start carefully gathering their thoughts before speaking them aloud. Some even find themselves stuck revising and reworking their messages, unable to settle on what they really want to say or how to say it.

If we're invested in communication as a human right and freedom for ALL, then we're invested in a kind of world and education *beyond* inclusion that *both* teaches ALL kids to read and write *and* embraces more democratic and communal modes of communication within and outside of the classroom walls. In kindergarten through fifth grade, a classroom assistant proficient in ASL and concept webs with picture icons helped me better understand and express what I was learning. These non-word-based forms of communication also offered diverse speakers alternative paths to literacy through touch, fingerspelling, and visual aids. As important, they sent a message that wordless forms of communication were welcome and, by extension, so was I, so were they.

For more about the communal and democratic advantages of multimodal communication, see DJ's article "Disrupting the Garden Wall" in Logic(s) Magazine.

David James "DJ" Savarese *is the Founder and Facilitator of The Lives-in-Progress Collective and Co-Chair of the Alliance for Citizen Directed Supports. He holds a BA from Oberlin College in Anthropology and Creative Writing. DJ is passionate about poetry, writing, and anything having to do with living a full life. Contact DJ at dj.savarese@gmail.com.*

Technology and Independence: Reclaiming the Roots of Innovation

By Kim Elliott and Jennifer Knapp

- Many technologies we use every day, like voice recognition and smart home devices, were first created to support people with disabilities.
- For people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), technology can provide safety, independence, and control over their lives, but cost can be a barrier.
- The Assistive Technology Lab helps people with disabilities learn about and access tools that meet their needs, like fall sensors and emergency alerts, so they can live safely at home.
- States across the U.S. are launching "Technology First" programs to make tech solutions a central part of disability support, helping people gain independence and easing staff shortages.

Technology has become so essential to our daily lives that it is hard to imagine a world without smartphones, smart homes, and instant access to information. Yet, many of the innovations we now take for granted — voice recognition, text-to-speech, predictive text, and smart home automation — were first developed as assistive technologies to support people with disabilities.

Decades ago, these tools were highly specialized, expensive, and often met with resistance. Today, with the rise of the internet, smartphones, and artificial intelligence (AI), technology is not only more affordable but also widely embraced. Ironically, however, as mainstream society has adopted and benefitted from these innovations, the very communities that inspired their creation — people with disabilities — are often excluded from the conversation.

For people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), off-the-shelf technologies like smartphones, wearables, and smart home devices are not luxuries. They are tools for independence, safety, and autonomy. Yet cost remains a barrier. Even modestly priced devices may be out of reach for people living on fixed incomes such as Social Security or Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

Technology as Independence

While many view new technologies as conveniences, for people with disabilities they remain essential supports. As both the general population and people with IDD age, the demand for direct support professionals (DSPs) continues to outpace supply. Technology offers a meaningful way to bridge this gap — empowering people with IDD to live the lives they choose, while alleviating workforce shortages.

As a supported living provider agency, at Community Vision we saw this potential early on. In 2018, in response to feedback from our local disability community, we launched an Assistive Technology (AT) Lab. The AT Lab is an education and resource center that serves the state of Oregon and SW Washington

but has also conducted trainings across the U.S. and Canada. Our goal is to increase capacity around technology solutions so that people with disabilities have the supports they need to acquire technology and successfully implement it into their daily lives.

Since launching our AT Lab, we have witnessed first-hand how technology transforms lives. More recently, our focus has expanded to supporting people with IDD who are aging in place, many of whom spent much of their early lives in state institutions and are determined to remain in their own homes.

Carlos' Story: Aging in Place with Dignity

One example is Carlos (name changed for privacy), a longtime community member who values both his independence and his neighborhood connections. As he aged, Carlos experienced health changes that increased his risk of falling, particularly at night when moving around in the dark. While he had daytime staff support, he lived alone at night.

The traditional solution would have been to assign overnight staff. However, Carlos cherished his privacy and independence. Instead, we explored technology that could support him while respecting his choices. With secured funding, we installed:

- Fall sensors and motion-activated lights to reduce nighttime risks
- An emergency button in the bathroom, placed near the floor for easy access
- Door sensors that distinguish between routine activities, like letting out his dog, and potential emergencies

For Carlos, these solutions meant maintaining control over his life. For the state, they also represented significant cost savings compared to ongoing staff coverage.

A National Movement: Technology First

Carlos' story is just one example of a growing national shift. At least 35 states have launched Technology First initiatives, recognizing technology as a primary solution for supporting people with IDD. In addition, 33 states now offer Remote Support Services (RSS) — technology-enabled supports that expand independence, address the DSP shortage, and reduce costs.

Looking Ahead: Responsibility and Opportunity

Technology solutions, especially AI, does not come without controversy and questions about privacy, equity, and ethics. However, as advocates and leaders in the disability community, we cannot afford to sit on the sidelines. We must engage directly in shaping how these tools are implemented to ensure that people with disabilities maintain agency, privacy, and choice.

Many technologies were born out of the disability rights movement. It is time to reclaim that legacy by ensuring that the next generation of innovation continues to serve its original purpose: empowering people to live full, self-directed lives.

If you have stories about technology successes that you would like to share or have any questions about tech or resources in your area, please reach out to us at atlab@cvision.org. You can also visit our website for information and free trainings on tech solutions: https://cv-atlab.org/

Kim Elliott *is the Director of Programs at Community Vision, a disability non-profit in Portland, Oregon. She holds a Master's of Science in Speech Language Pathology and is a certified Assistive Technology Professional. She has focused much of her career on working with people who have communication disabilities and is passionate about increasing communication access for all. Contact Kim at kim@cvision.org.*

Jennifer Knapp *is the Executive Director at Community Vision, a disability non-profit in Portland, Oregon. Jennifer has worked with Community Vision since 2016 providing the vision and management to ensure qualified staff, impactful program design and evaluation, clear administrative procedures, adequate funding sources, and critical partners. Contact Jennifer at jennifer@cvision.org.*

Tools and Resources to Learn About Tech in the Nonprofit Sector

- Technology changes quickly and it can be hard to stay up to date.
- There are many ways that technology can make the work of nonprofit leaders a little easier.
- This chart describes tools and resources to help nonprofit leaders learn about technology that may help them work towards their organization's mission.

Resource	Resource Type		Area(s) of Focus	Paywall Yes/ No/ Some	Description
	Tool Kit	Class/ Webinar			
Nonprofit Tech for Good	X	X	AI, Digital Marketing, Fundraising, Data Management	Some	This website provides easy-to-use and understand news, updates, open resources, and classes about tech that supports digital marking, data management, and raising.
NTEN	X	X	AI, Communication, Digital Equity & Inclusion, Fundraising, Data Security, & More	Some	NTEN provides resources for organizations committed to the social good to learn to use technology to support their mission.
Nonprofit Leadership Alliance	X	X	Fundraising, Content Management, Communication, Professional Development Platforms	Some	This organization is committed to supporting the future of the nonprofit sector. The website provides free tools and resources as well as paid courses and credentials. One particularly useful resource is their 2025 "6 Tools and Resources Nonprofits Need."

Resource	Resource Type		Area(s) of Focus	Paywall Yes/ No/ Some	Description
	Tool Kit	Class/ Webinar			
Nonprofit Hub: The Nonprofit Story Telling Guide	X		Digital Storytelling	No	This free guide gives practical steps, tips, and advice for nonprofits to use technology to tell their story and help those they serve tell their story as well.
Apparo: Free Resources for Nonprofits- Improve Technology and Processes	X		Finding Grants, Fundraising, Communication, Content Creation & Editing, & More	No	This site provides a database for free tech available to nonprofits to help them achieve their mission.
Tech Soup	X	X	Fundraising, Content Creation & Editing, Communication, AI & More	Some	This site provides a catalog of software relevant to nonprofits as well as courses on how to use many of the resources.
TechImpact	X	X	Fundraising, Cyber Security, Content Creation & Editing, Communication, AI & More	Some	Provides assessment tools to identify your organization's tech needs, free articles, research resources, consumer guides, and some paid and free courses on a wide range of technology topics.

Check out these other resources that may be helpful to you or others you support:

https://www.makersmakingchange.com/

A non-profit that focuses on building and offering free 3D print plans for accessible devices. You can also request that one of their volunteers print a thing if they don't have access to a 3D printer. They frequently hold design challenges to try and make new assistive 3D print designs. This link is the library of all the designs they've collected so far: Assistive Devices

REHAB-LAB - Assistive devices repository

This is a community of people similar to Makers Making Change. It is based in France, so they have some things only relevant to that area, but they have a large repository of files for 3D printing assistive tech that is very organized. They publish news and info articles, like how occupational therapists can use 3D printed tech.

Playing Mirror›s Edge with voice control and face tracking : r/disabledgamers

This is a reddit community focused on gamers who have disabilities. People share their own setups, others ask what they would need to play games as far as assistive devices, and just general discussion on what game developers or hardware manufactures can do to make their games more accessible. Here's example post where someone is showing off how they play a fairly complicated game with just face tracking and their voice. There is also the general disability subreddit to discuss anything and everything: https://www.reddit.com/r/disability/. Finding any discussion board for specific disabilities or needs is a great place to find resources and find solutions from others in a similar situation.

Disability Technology | Jeff Paradee | TEDxLSSC

A Ted Talk video about an artist/gamer and how difficult it was to find accessible tech along with how he's managed to use the tech he did find.

AT Champions Technology Guides – TechOWL

Your state may have something like a 'State's Assistive Technology System' website. The Pennsylvania one in particular is very robust. They have a large list of devices to learn about as well as some handy tech-related guides. For example, some of the guides range from using tech to make or keep appointments, to a social media survival guide, my first smartphone, and general internet safety.

www.reddit.com/r/wheelchairs

A subreddit focused just on wheelchairs. It's been great when trying to find discussion or advice regarding wheelchairs.

https://atbanter.com/

AT Banter is a podcast about assistive tech news such as new products.

Design Meets Disability

A book on product design and disability. It's more geared to product designers, but may have you question why most disability aids look boring, clinical, or just ugly. Especially compared to another disability aid such as glasses which have an interesting and playful fashion design while also being practical.

The 7 Principles of Universal Design | Ed Roberts Campus

A video explaining the concept of Universal Design. Universal Design builds upon things such as the Americans with Disabilities Act in terms of making spaces, buildings, documents and products more than just accessible but with no barriers. An example from the video of Universal Design is Ikea assembly instructions and how it communicates instructions with little-to-no words.

What We're Reading, Viewing, and Listening To

Title: Technology for Good: How Nonprofit Leaders are Using Software and Data to Solve our Most Pressing Social Problems

Author: Jim Fruchterman (2025)

Description: In this compelling book, Fruchterman describes how nonprofit leaders can use data and software to solve big problems in a smatter way. Specifically, he discusses how these tools can help bring good work to scale. The book offers practical tips and advice about how to organize, fund, staff and manage nonprofit tech projects and argues that technology literacy is no longer optional, but essential for nonprofits to fulfill their missions.

Title: AI's Impact on Nonprofit Success

Author/Editor: Keli Melissa Reinhardt/TEDxCherry Creek Women (2024)

Description: In this brief TEDx talk, Reinhard discusses how AI can empower nonprofit leaders who are often overworked and understaffed. Specifically, Reinhard shares how the tools can be used to help stay informed about grant opportunities, help with the organization of grant proposals, communication, social media, and other important tasks.

Title: The Smart Nonprofit: Staying Human-Centered in An Automated World

Author/Editor: Beth Kanter & Allison H. Fine (2022)

Description: This book discusses how nonprofit can use automation to accelerate social change strategically and ethically. They discuss how leaders must use AI consciously and stay human centered to align with their mission and to "root out" human bias that is often embedded in automation and artificial intelligence.

Title: AI for Nonprofits: Putting Artificial Intelligence to Work for Your Cause

Author: Darian Rodriguez Heyman & Cheryl Contee (2025)

Description: In this book, a team of nonprofit experts provide a "how to guide" for nonprofit and foundation leaders who are looking to integrate artificial intelligence into their organizations' operation. The book serves as an up-to-date reference guide with practical techniques that leaders can start applying tomorrow.

Title: Nonprofit AI: A Comprehensive Guide to Implementing Artificial Intelligence for Social Good

Author: Nathan Chappell & Scott Rosenkrans (2025)

Description: Chappell and Rosenkran's book provides practical tips on how to incorporate AI into a mission driven organization. This book also provides a thoughtful and honest discussion about ethical frameworks for AI use and its limitations. The case studies and tools are particularly useful.

Title: Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community

Author: Joe Lamber & Brooke Hessler (2018)

Description: This book provides a clear guide to telling better stories about the people and communities that organizations serve through digital platforms. It discusses the process of noticing, assembling, and sharing stories in a compelling way and discusses ethical considerations.

Title: The Power of Digital Storytelling

Author/Editor: Emily Bailin/TEDxSoleburySchool

Description: In this brief video, Dr. Bailin describes the power of merging technology with art in the process of storytelling.

Title: How Smart Tech is Transforming Nonprofits

Authors: Allison Fine & Beth Kanter (2021).

Description: This Harvard Business Review article discusses the expansive way nonprofits are utilizing technology across social service agencies. It highlights use of robots, AI, and HR software to free staff to devote more of their time to creating transformational change.

Upcoming Events

Registration is open for the following programs:

The Fall Leadership Institute in San Diego, CA

November 9-14, 2025

The Fall 2025 Leadership Institute will be held November 9-14, 2025 in-person in San Diego, California at the San Diego Regional Center. Applications are open now, visit https://natleadership.org/week-long-institute3.html for more information or to apply. This Institute is open to all disability sector leaders.

The Winter Leadership Institute in Atlanta, GA

January 25-30, 2026

The Winter 2026 Leadership Institute will be held January 25-30, 2026 in-person in Atlanta, GA. Applications are open now, visit https://natleadership.org/week-long-institute3.html for more information or to apply. This Institute is open to all disability sector leaders. If you are a leader with a disability or a Direct Support Professional you can apply for scholarship support to cover tuition and some travel and hotel costs!

The Spring Leadership Institute in Kansas City, MO

April 12-17, 2026

The Spring 2026 Leadership Institute will be held April 12-17, 2026 in-person in Kansas City, MO at the University of Missouri – Kansas City. Applications are open now, visit https://natleadership.org/week-long-institute3.html for more information or to apply. This Institute is open to all disability sector leaders. If you are a leader with a disability or a Direct Support Professional you can apply for scholarship support to cover tuition and some travel and hotel costs!

The Wisconsin Leadership Institute in Greenbay, WI

July 12-17, 2026

The Wisconsin Leadership Institute will be held July 12-17, 2026 in-person in Eau Clare, Wisconsin. Applications are open now, visit https://natleadership.org/wisconsin.html for more information or to apply. This Institute is open to Wisconsin-based disability sector leaders. Due to generous funding through the Inclusa Foundation, participation in the program is $100 per person.

Applications will be opening soon for the following programs:

The Summer 2026 Leadership Institute

The Fall 2026 Leadership Institute

If you'd like to be notified when we open registration or applications for future trainings including the Institutes listed above, please add your name to the list by visiting https://natleadership.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9z9rSudkRwklVPg.

Contact Us: https://natleadership.org/bulletin • bulletin@natleadership.org

If you have any trouble accessing the referenced material, please email Amanda J. Rich at openroadicc@gmail.com.