

## Assistive Technology Reuse and Its Role in Recovery: Additional Community-Based Assets for Emergency Managers

By Elizabeth A. Davis, JD, EdM, Executive Director, EAD & Associates, LLC,  
Founding Board Member, EPI Global, and Chair, IAEM-USA Special Needs Caucus

In our ongoing effort to identify, understand and best utilize needed assets in our communities for those impacted by disaster, there exists a national network to be tapped into and brought to the table formally by all emergency managers.

Under the Assistive Technology Act, the Rehabilitation Services Administration – a component of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) – funds a statewide AT program in each of the 50 states and six territories, and the majority of these programs support AT device reuse activities.

For many people with disabilities, assistive technology (AT) is an essential support to daily living. A person may depend on a wheelchair, walker, special computer keyboard, speech generating device or other AT device at home, school or work. AT is a broad descriptor for anything from low tech (such as a transfer board on which a person can slide from a wheelchair into the backseat of a car) to high tech equipment (such as speech reader software) and everything in between.

### Reuse Increases Availability

Reuse of AT is emerging as one of the ways to make AT more available. To the extent that AT reuse is practiced today, it's generally done through device exchange programs, device recycling programs or device refurbishment programs. Hundreds of organizations around the country, large and small, are involved in AT reuse. From state agencies to nonprofits, hospitals and churches, there are AT reuse programs in all parts of the country meeting all kinds of needs.

Until recently there was weak coordination of and among these programs to ensure an efficient and effective system for getting used AT into the hands of those who need it. However, with the realization in the past few years of the hugely important role AT can play, especially during the recovery phase in disaster, this is changing.

The reality is that with proper identification of immediate need for access to AT post disaster and a proper match to available AT, those impacted by disaster can more quickly regain independence. Providing AT for someone in the immediate aftermath of a disaster serves as a "quick fix" until proper evaluation, fitting and customization for a permanent solution can take place.

### Three Levels to View AT in the Emergency Life Cycle

■ **Individual Level.** If people who use AT on a regular basis actually incorporate their AT into their pre-disaster *planning*, the recovery process is greatly improved. This can be as simple as keeping a record of equipment make, model, funding program, and other important documents in the event that their AT is damaged, destroyed or lost during a disaster.

■ **Provider/Nexus of Care Level.** Any practitioners, caregivers and case managers in contact with people using AT can advise on the importance of taking necessary preparedness steps. Also, professionals can learn how to identify ways to utilize AT in unconventional ways during disaster *response* until appropriate solutions can be put back in place. This might mean learning how to switch a power chair into manual use mode or realizing that, with Velcro attached to utensils, persons

can independently feed themselves in a shelter. A picture communication board or chart using pictorals can assist in communication until power sourced technology is restored. Any care professional can become involved at this level. In fact, many of these professionals actually have added disaster preparedness to their code of ethics and/or description of professional responsibilities.

### ■ Systems/Network Level.

Emergency managers should reach out to the local AT network to find matches of AT in the existing reuse programs that can be redirected for needed matches during the first phases of *recovery* post-disaster. It is the AT network that is best suited not only to help with those matches but also to logistically coordinate the quality review before materials are brought in to be sure it will not cause further harm and is appropriate for immediate reuse.

### Conclusion

Because AT reuse is already a supported mission of the AT system, it is a perfect example of bringing assets to the recovery table that may not have been thought of as disaster-specific under usual circumstances. Once aware of AT, emergency managers realize we are already engaged across these lines of care providers and are in a unique position to tie all the skills and needs together to benefit a disaster survivor.

### Learn More

For further consideration, an AT/EM blog, and to find the center in your area, visit the Pass It On Center website at [www.passitoncenter.org](http://www.passitoncenter.org).