

What Goes

Recycling programs can enhance consumer choice

By Courtney Burke, M.S.

Providers, consumers, payers and therapists are dismayed when they see assistive technology abandoned because it was no longer needed or because it was inappropriate for the consumer. Their frustration is often justified because they know firsthand that the process of evaluating, prescribing, funding and fitting assistive technology can be lengthy and expensive.

To address the abandonment dilemma while simultaneously carrying out Tech Act purposes, several federally funded state Tech Act projects have established assistive technology recycling, loan or exchange programs. These initiatives offer convenient options for less expensive and alternative use for otherwise abandoned devices. Faced with the sunset provision of the federal Tech Act, states are working to ensure that this cost-efficient access to assistive technology remains available to consumers in the event that Tech Act projects are no longer funded.

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To help Tech Act projects and other interested groups in establishing effective AT equipment recycling, loan and exchange programs, a feasibility study of assistive technology recycling programs was conducted. The New York State Office of Advocate for Persons with Disabilities, Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Project (Traid), in collaboration with the New Hampshire Alliance for Assistive Technology and the University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability, secured funding for the study from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research.

The study was done to help identify barriers to the establishment of recycling programs. Both New York and New Hampshire, which operate their own recycling programs, hoped the study would serve as a replicable model and resource for other groups interested in establishing AT recycling, loan or lease programs.

Data collection for the study began in April 1996, and the final study was published in March 1997. This article provides an overview of the operational components of various recycling programs and highlights findings of particular interest to service providers, consumers and suppliers.



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To collect data for the study, a policy analyst at the Traid Project surveyed 30 identified recycling programs, of which 25 responded with completed surveys. After receiving survey responses, programs were categorized as:

- A recycling program: one that breaks down and refurbishes equipment.
- A loan program: one that lends equipment with the expectation it will be returned.

- An exchange program: one that links individuals with equipment with others in need of equipment.

In total, 18 recycling, three loan and four exchange programs were included in the analysis. The strengths and weaknesses of each program were described and recommendations for optimal operational techniques were developed.

• **Overview of Participating Recycling Programs:**

In comparing the general features of the surveyed programs—such as size, geographic area of operation and volume of equipment recycled—great disparities were found among the survey respondents. For instance, some programs were found to recycle hundreds of items per month; others recycled fewer than five items per month.

The survey indicated that programs differed in range of inventory; some recycled all types of assistive technology, others recycled only one type of equipment. The most common item recycled by the programs surveyed was computers.

■ **Consumer's Equipment Needs:** The administrative and managerial aspects of the programs were examined to determine strengths and shortcomings and to allow for the development of recommendations. To determine if recycling programs were meeting consumer needs, programs were asked to identify the equipment most needed by consumers. Findings indicated that programs recycling only computers had the highest consumer demand for more modern computers. Responding programs indicated, however, that with the rapid evolution of computer technology, it was difficult to acquire and deliver sufficient numbers of higher-end computers to consumers. For programs recycling, loaning or exchanging a variety of assistive technology, lightweight wheelchairs and scooters were most frequently needed by consumers.

• **Methods Used to Establish Assistive Technology**



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and the efforts of providers, payers and therapists.

Recycling Programs: Survey findings indicated that almost every program used collaborative partnerships to begin operation. By drawing from a diverse group of people to assist in the planning process, committee participants were likelier to be invested in the recycling program and to give financial support.

Funding SOURCES: A majority of the programs surveyed received start-up funds from their state Tech Act Program. Several others indicated they received start-up funding from a disability related organization, government body or charitable organization.

Once established with an initial grant, most programs have leveraged funds from multiple funding sources. For instance, New Hampshire generates funds from charging vendors fees and by establishing a charge for refurbished equipment. Many programs surveyed had been able to leverage funds from private organizations and state agencies. Overall, findings indicated that multiple sources for funding was the best option for equipment recycling programs.

Personnel: Survey responses indicated that staffing for recycling programs varied greatly depending on the type of program. Exchange programs usually required only one par-time staff person; The programs refurbishing a variety of assistive technology, however, required a full-time person knowledgeable in a range of assistive technology.


It was found that people who had worked for medical equipment companies were more effective at recycling used medical equipment because of their product knowledge. Several programs indicated that they often rely on consumers to help them refurbish equipment.

Quality Assurance: Ensuring quality in AT recycling programs was hindered by a lack of protocols for product selection and for fair and appropriate equipment distribution. Many consumers who had purchased equipment through a recycling program had not been evaluated to determine their equipment needs. To help ensure that consumers were likelier to get appro-

priate equipment, some recycling programs had staff to assist consumers in choosing equipment based on need. Other programs indicated that they allowed consumers to test equipment before purchase.

Liability: To avoid liability issues, some programs require equipment vendors to assume liability after purchasing refurbished equipment from the recycling program. Under this arrangement, the responsibility of inspecting the equipment for proper function is left to the vendors who are purchasing refurbished equipment from the recycling program. After inspection and purchase, the vendors then sell the equipment at a slightly higher price to consumers. Other programs avoid complications by requiring consumers to sign a release.

Conclusion: Taking into consideration the different methods for establishing a program, the study concluded that the feasibility of successful operation of an assistive technology recycling, loan or exchange program is largely dependent upon the following factors: community needs, available resources, commitment and collaborating partners. Groups must recognize that there are inherent pros and cons of choosing to operate a program in different ways. Recycling programs should also expand methods for ensuring quality by establishing protocols for more appropriate selection and equitable distribution of equipment.

Lastly, to avoid negatively affecting sufficient marketplace response to the ongoing demand for new assistive technology, managers should foster establishment of a recycling program as complementary to existing sources of assistive technology. Emphasis should be on the roles of enhancing consumer choice, increasing vendor options for purchasing equipment, and salvaging residual use in abandoned equipment, rather than being a stopgap measure for addressing an existing inadequacy in affordable sources for assistive technology. 

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