



*Independence Through
Enhancement of
Medicare and Medicaid*
COALITION

VIA FACSIMILE AND FIRST CLASS MAIL

March 12, 2004

The Honorable Bill Frist
Majority Leader
The United States Senate
461 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Thomas A. Daschle
Minority Leader
The United States Senate
509 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader Frist and Minority Leader Daschle,

We write to ask you to support the reauthorization of a piece of legislation that is critically important to people with disabilities of all ages -- the Assistive Technology Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-394) ("Assistive Technology Act"). The ITEM Coalition is a consumer-led coalition comprised of over seventy non-profit organizations interested in maintaining and improving access to and coverage of assistive devices, technologies and related services for Americans with disabilities or chronic health conditions. The memberships of many of the organizations that comprise the ITEM Coalition have benefited from and often depend upon the many programs that have been funded under the Assistive Technology Act.

Assistive technology such as screen readers for computers, wheelchairs, home and automobile modifications, orthopedic devices, communication and reading aids, hearing aids, respirators and a host of other devices have become an essential part of life for people with disabilities. Over fifteen million Americans with disabilities reported using assistive devices or technologies in recent surveys.¹ Factor in the aging population and the numbers increase dramatically. The past two decades have produced phenomenal advancements in such technology, allowing individuals to significantly increase their functional capabilities, health and independence. The Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-407) envisioned this and the Assistive Technology Act reaffirmed this when passed in 1998. Failure to reauthorize the Assistive Technology Act would squander the investments made in the Assistive Technology Act programs and represent a huge missed opportunity.

The Assistive Technology Act has developed federal/state partnerships designed to target and support the varied needs of children, working and older Americans with disabilities. Fifty-six states and territories have developed programs that increase availability of and access to assistive technology,

¹ Carlson, D., Ehrlich, N., Berland, B.J., and Bailey, N., Assistive Technology Survey Results: Continued Benefits and Needs Reported by Americans with Disabilities, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, 2001.

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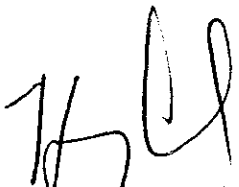
improve advocacy efforts, and provide important assistive technology information for consumer awareness. For example, programs authorized by the Act provide places where people with disabilities can experience the technology and receive assistance from qualified staff making it far easier to make good decisions about what is useful. No other places offer this opportunity. In addition, under the Protection and Advocacy for Assistive Technology Program (PAAT), advocates provide information, support and representation to people with disabilities on accessing assistive devices.

However, this work is far from over. It is critical to reauthorize the Act this year and ensure the continuation of the Assistive Technology Act programs, including the Title I state grant program and the PAAT program. Failure to do so would be a devastating setback for adults and children with disabilities who depend on assistive technology for access to education, employment and other essential activities.

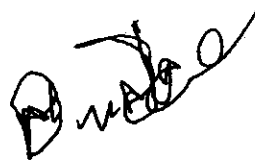
The withdrawal of funding for the Assistive Technology Act programs would dissolve the infrastructure that the past fifteen years of state and federal partnership has developed, leaving the consumers, providers and advocates who have made great strides towards independence for people with disabilities of every age to take huge steps backward. The goal of independence and full functioning for people with disabilities is not a goal that should be sunsetted by an arbitrary timeframe. We urge you to support the reauthorization of the Assistive Technology Act, ensure the continuation of Assistive Technology Act programs, and enact reauthorization legislation this year.

Thank you for your consideration.

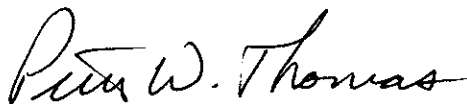
Sincerely,



Henry Claypool
Advancing Independence
ITEM Coalition Steering Committee Member



Paul W. Schroeder
American Foundation for the Blind
ITEM Coalition Steering Committee Member



Peter W. Thomas
Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities
Health Task Force
ITEM Coalition Steering Committee Member



Lee Page
Paralyzed Veterans of America
ITEM Coalition Steering Committee Member

Cc: Chairman Judd Gregg (R-NH)
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor & Pensions

Ranking Member Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor & Pension

Attachment: List of ITEM Coalition Members