

Title: It's All about Access

Presenters:

- Lee Learson, Assistive Technology Program Development Consultant, Creative Pathways Associates, Portsmouth, New Hampshire
- Jennifer Baker, Program Coordinator, New England Adaptive Technology (NEAT) Marketplace, Hartford

Sponsor: CLA Americans with Disabilities Act Committee

Reporter: Douglas C. Lord

Lee Learson, Assistive Technology Program Development Consultant from Creative Pathways Associates in New Hampshire, covered best practices and other principles that help libraries choose appropriate assistive technology in serving patrons with disabilities.

Learson, assisted by Jennifer Baker of the New England Adaptive Technology (NEAT) Marketplace, stressed to the session's 35 attendees that while adaptive technology comprises a set of helpful tools with which people can accomplish things, merely acquiring the technology will never be enough.

In a New England accent reminiscent of Katharine Hepburn, Learson encouraged libraries to be familiar with their communities' demographics and to survey and talk with their patrons with disabilities about what they want and need. Learson also emphasized the critical role of staff training in serving persons with disabilities.

Animated and clearly passionate about her work, Learson noted how lucky Connecticut's libraries are to have access to NEAT in Hartford and Vision Dynamics in Cheshire. This former Director of the NEAT encouraged librarians and staff to test drive equipment and keep abreast of new technology and developments at these locations.

Learson asked libraries to examine what equipment they own, to consider if the equipment is being used, and if not, why? While Baker passed out Microsoft's Accessibility cd's, and resource lists, Learson stressed the importance of staff training and spending scarce library resources wisely. Learson heartily recommended libraries "Go play with the equipment" at NEAT before purchasing it out of catalogs or elsewhere.

The session offered much down-to-earth detail; though a wide range of technology was considered, Learson's focus on effective, yet inexpensive, tools (e.g., pivot transfer seats, gripper/grabbers, book holders, etc) was considerate of library budgets.

Learson covered the kinds of assistive technology available in different areas (communication, entertainment, etc) and pinpointed a few tools in each. Helpful specifics on the pros and cons of particular pieces of equipment included height-adjustable tables; though an excellent consideration, avoid the hand crank models; threshold ramps and off-set door hinges (both about \$40) are both inexpensive ways to ease access; and mid-range handheld magnifiers provide bang for your buck. Learson also feels strongly that FM loop systems and portable personal amplifiers are worthwhile because they are relatively inexpensive.

Attendees were also kept busy with a variety of show-and-tell items from NEAT's inventory; keyboards (low vision, non-qwerty, big-key), switch toys, hand-held magnifiers, big-button remotes, and a variety of pointing devices were all passed around.

Learson noted that a lot of technology, like voice recognition and word prediction software as well as touch screens, has seen massive improvement and cost reduction since being introduced years ago.

Attendee Sheri Szymanski, Assistant Director of the Stratford Library Association, came to the program "looking for up-to-date tools that consider the library's budget;" she left feeling that "the program did a really good job of sharing what's current and available" in terms of resources and information. She was also keen to check out upcoming NEAT Expos (free of charge) and the new NEAT satellite facility in Stratford.